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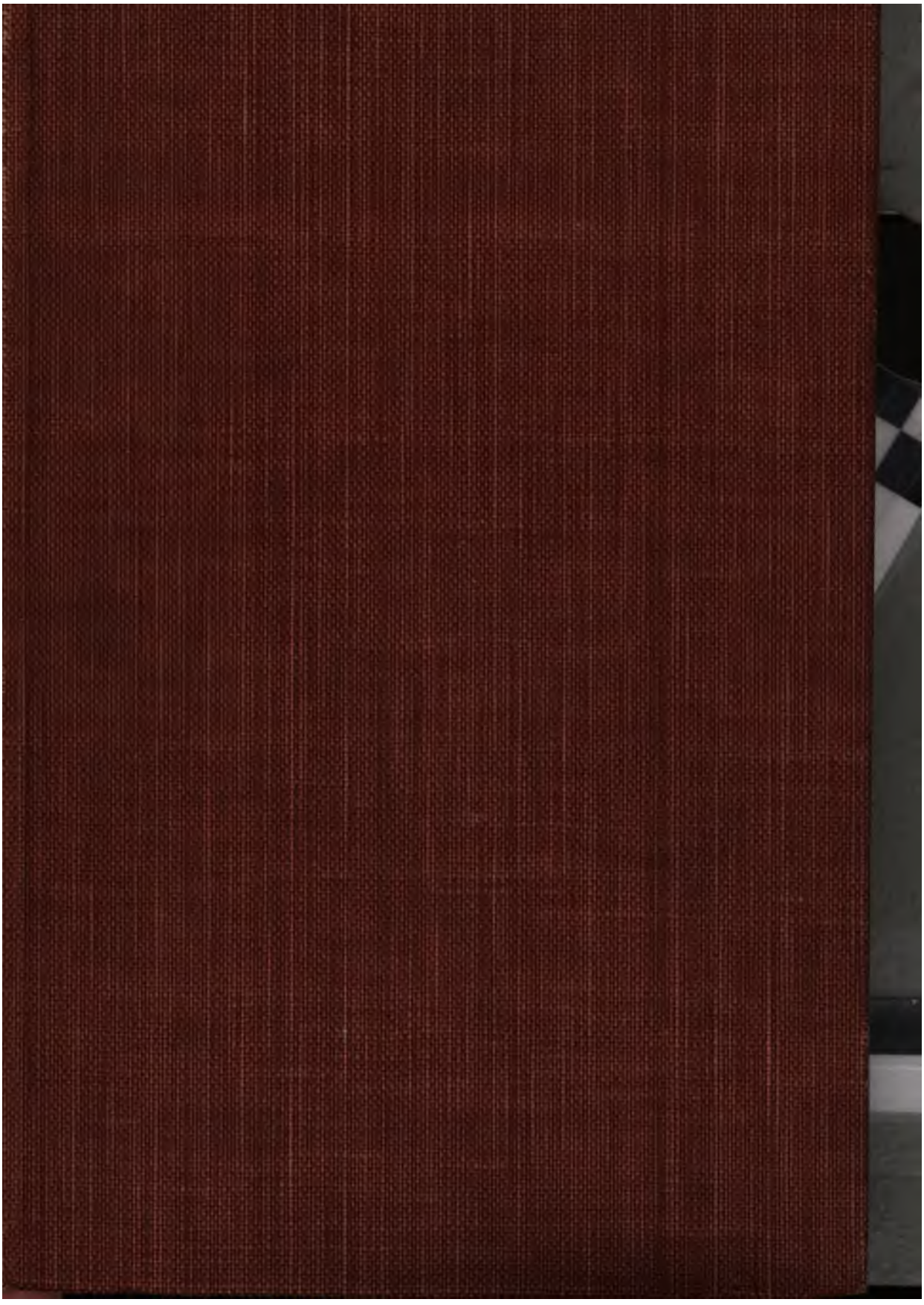

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THE SEVEN CARDINAL SINS

PRIDE — CONTINUED

Pride — One of the Seven Cardinal Sins.

ILLUSTRATED WITH ETCHINGS BY ADRIAN MARCEL.

BY EUGENE SUE

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOLUME II.

BOSTON

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PRIDE.

CHAPTER I.

MADAME HERBAUT'S PARTY.

MADAME HERBAUT occupied quite a spacious suite of apartments on the third floor of the same house in which Commander Bernard lived.

The rooms devoted to these Sunday reunions consisted of the dining-room, where the young people danced to the music of the piano; the drawing-room, where there were card-tables for those who did not care to dance, and, lastly, Madame Herbaut's bedroom, where guests could sit and chat without being disturbed by the noise of the dancing, and without disturbing the card-players.

This simply furnished, but comfortable abode indicated that Madame Herbaut — who, by the way, was the widow of a small merchant — was in very comfortable circumstances, though far from rich.

The worthy woman's two daughters found lucrative employment, one in painting on china, the other in copying music, — work which had led to her acquaintance with Herminie, who also copied music when pupils were scarce.

The rooms presented a scene of even more than usual gaiety that evening. There were about fifteen young

girls, none over twenty years of age, all resolved to make the most of Sunday, their only day of rest and pleasure, so richly earned by toil and confinement all the week, either at the counter, in the office, in some gloomy little back shop on the Rue St. Denis or the Rue des Bourdonnais, or perhaps in some *pension.*

Some of these young girls were extremely pretty, and nearly all were dressed with the good taste that characterises the attire of this humble and industrious class of people only in Paris, probably.

These poor girls, being obliged to work hard all the rest of the week, reserved all their little coquettish adornments for their one fête day, the day so impatiently awaited on Saturday, and so deeply regretted on Monday.

As is usual at such reunions, the masculine element in the little assembly presented a much less elegant and stylish appearance than the feminine element. In fact, but for some almost imperceptible shades of difference, most of these young girls were as bright and attractive as if they belonged to the very best society, but this slight superiority on the part of the young girls was soon forgotten, thanks to the cordial good-humour and frank gaiety, tempered with respect, which the young men displayed towards their fair companions.

Instead of being at its best about one o'clock in the morning, as is generally the case with a fashionable ball, this little assembly reached the very zenith of animation and enjoyment about nine o'clock, as the hostess always sent her guests home relentlessly before midnight, so they would be ready to resume work the next morning at the accustomed hour.

And what a dreary time Monday morning was, with the music and laughter of the night before still ringing in your ears, and the prospect of six long days of close confinement and drudgery before you!

But with what growing impatience and transports of joy you watched the approach of the longed-for day.

MADAME HERBAUT'S PARTY.

It comes at last, and then what exuberant happiness!

Oh, rare and modest joys that have never been impaired by satiety!

But Madame Herbaut's guests were not philosophising much that evening. They were reserving their philosophy for Monday.

These untiring young people were whirling swiftly around the room to the inspiring strains of a lively polka; and such was the magic of the strains that even the ladies and gentlemen in the drawing-room, in spite of their age and the grave preoccupations of Pope Joan and loto, — the only games Madame Herbaut allowed, — moved their heads to and fro and kept time with their feet, in short, executed a sort of antiquated sitting polka, which testified to the skill of the musician at the piano.

And this musician was Herminie.

About a month had passed since her first meeting with Gerald. Had other meetings followed that interview begun under most unpleasant auspices and ending with a gracious forgiveness? We shall know in due time.

This evening, in a dress of some soft, pale blue material that cost, perhaps, twenty sous a yard, and a large bow of ribbon of the same delicate hue in her magnificent golden hair, the duchess was ravishingly beautiful.

A faint rose tint suffused her cheeks, her large blue eyes shone like stars, and her half smiling scarlet lips revealed a row of pearl-white teeth, while her girlish bosom rose and fell gently beneath the thin fabric that veiled it, and her little foot, daintily clad in a satin slipper, beat time to the strains of the lively polka.

To-day there could be no doubt that Herminie was very happy. Far from holding herself aloof from the amusements of her companions, Herminie greatly enjoyed seeing them enjoy themselves, and always did everything in her power to add to their pleasure, but this generosity of feeling would hardly suffice to explain

the exuberance of life and youth and happiness which imparted an unusually radiant expression to the enchanting features of the duchess. One somehow felt that this charming creature knew how charming and lovely and refined she was, and that the knowledge made her, not proud, but happy, — happy like those generous possessors of wealth, who prize their wealth chiefly because it enables them to confer happiness on others.

Though the duchess was deeply interested in her polka and the dancers, she turned her head involuntarily several times on hearing the door open, but on seeing the persons who entered, she seemed rather to reproach herself for her inattention to the business in hand.

The door opened again, and again Herminie cast a quick, almost impatient glance in that direction.

The newcomer this time was Olivier, the commander's nephew.

Seeing the young soldier leave the door open as if some one was following him, Herminie blushed slightly, and ventured another glance. But alas! in the doorway behind him there appeared a stout, rosy youth of eighteen, with an honest, artless face, and hands encased in green kid gloves.

It is difficult to say why Herminie seemed a little disappointed on the entrance of this youth, — perhaps it was because she hated green kid gloves, — but the disappointment betrayed itself in a charming pout and in the increasing vivacity of the strains to which her little foot was impatiently beating time.

The polka ended, Herminie, who had been at the piano ever since the beginning of the evening, was immediately surrounded, and thanked and complimented and furthermore invited to dance by a number of the young men, but she filled the souls of the aspirants with despair by pleading a slight lameness as an excuse for not dancing that evening.

And you should have seen the gait Herminie adopted,

in support of this atrocious falsehood, decided upon the minute she saw Olivier come in alone! Certainly no wounded dove ever dragged her little pink foot along with a more distressed air.

Inconsolable at this accident which deprived them of the much coveted pleasure of dancing with the duchess, the aspirants, hoping for some compensation, offered their arm to the interesting cripple, but she had the cruelty to prefer the support of Madame Herbaut's eldest daughter, and repaired with her to that lady's room to rest and get a little fresh air, she said, as the windows of that apartment overlooked Commander Bernard's garden.

Herminie had hardly left the room, leaning on Hortense Herbaut's arm, when Mlle. de Beaumesnil arrived, accompanied by Madame Laîné.

The richest heiress in France wore a dress of simple white muslin, with a narrow blue sash, and her entrance was unnoticed, though it occurred during the interval between two quadrilles.

Ernestine was not pretty, neither was she ugly, so no one paid the slightest attention to her; and as the young girl compared this reception with the flattering eagerness with which people had crowded around her heretofore, her heart sank, and she began to realise the truth of M. de Maillefort's words.

"They knew my name at the other entertainments," Ernestine said to herself, "and it was only the heiress that they gazed at, and flattered, and besieged with attentions."

Madame Laîné was just introducing Ernestine to Madame Herbaut when that lady's eldest daughter, who had accompanied Herminie to the bedroom, said, after a glance into the drawing-room:

"I must leave you, my dear duchess. I notice that a lady has just come in who wrote to mamma this morn-

ing, asking permission to bring a young relative with her, so you see — "

"Why, go, of course, my dear Hortense. You must do the honours of your house, certainly," replied Herminie, not sorry, perhaps, to be left alone awhile.

So Mlle. Herbaut rejoined her mother, who was welcoming Ernestine with simple cordiality.

"You will soon become used to our ways, my dear," she was saying. "The young girls and the young men dance in the dining-room, while their mothers and fathers — when they come — play cards in the drawing-room, so you see each guest amuses himself to his liking."

Then, to her daughter, she added:

"Hortense, take mademoiselle to the dining-room. You, my dear friend," she continued, addressing the governess, "must come to the Pope Joan table. I know your taste, you see."

As we said before, this introduction had taken place in the interval between the polka and a quadrille, and a young painter, a very good musician, having taken Herminie's seat, now struck a few chords as a signal for the dancers to take their places.

The Herbaut girls, being daughters of the house, and being also extremely pretty and good-natured, seldom lacked for partners, and Olivier, wearing with much grace the dashing uniform which would have sufficed to distinguish him from the other men, even if he had not been remarkably prepossessing in appearance, approached Mlle. Herbaut just as she was entering the dining-room, in company with Ernestine, and said:

"You haven't forgotten, I hope, that this quadrille belongs to me, Mlle. Hortense. Don't you think we had better take our places?"

"I will be at your service in a second, M. Olivier," replied Hortense, who was conducting Mlle. de Beau-

mesnil towards a long couch, on which several other young girls were seated.

"I hope you will pardon me for leaving you so soon," she remarked to Ernestine, "but I am engaged for this dance. Won't you take a seat here on the couch. I'm sure you will not lack for partners."

"Pray do not trouble yourself any further about me, mademoiselle," replied Ernestine.

The sounds of the piano becoming more and more peremptory, Hortense Herbaut hurried off to join her partner, and Mlle. de Beaumesnil seated herself on the couch.

The test on which Ernestine had so courageously resolved was beginning in earnest. Near her sat five or six young girls, the least attractive, it must be admitted, of the guests, and who, not having been engaged in advance, like the belles of the ball, were modestly waiting for an invitation to take part in the quadrille.

Either because Ernestine's companions were prettier than she was, or because their manner was more attractive, she saw one after another of them invited, without any apparent notice being taken of her.

Only one very plain-looking young girl was sharing Mlle. de Beaumesnil's neglected condition when some one exclaimed:

"Another couple is needed! We must have another couple here!"

The youth so gorgeously adorned with the apple-green kid gloves was anxious to do his part towards filling the vacancy, so, seeing two young girls still unengaged, he rushed forward to invite one of them, but instead of making his choice unhesitatingly, so as to spare the one that was left the petty humiliation of feeling herself weighed in the balance only to be found wanting, he stood for a few seconds as if undecided, and then selected Mlle. de Beaumesnil's neighbour, his preference

being, doubtless, due to the greater showiness of her apparel.

Trivial as this incident seems, perhaps, it would be difficult to describe the intense anguish that wrung Mlle. de Beaumesnil's heart.

On seeing several of the other young girls invited in turn, Ernestine's natural modesty had excused the preference thus evinced, but in proportion as the number of her companions diminished, and when she at last found herself left alone with this unprepossessing companion, whose homeliness was not even redeemed by any pretensions to elegance of manner, her heart sank within her, but when she saw herself disdained, as it were, after having been compared with her companion, she experienced a terrible shock.

"Alas!" she said to herself, with infinite sadness, "if I cannot stand comparison with these young girls around me, and particularly with this last one, nobody can ever care for me, and any one who tries to convince me to the contrary must be — I see plainly now — actuated only by base and mercenary motives. All these young girls who have been preferred to me can, at least, feel assured that the preference is sincere, — there are no cruel doubts to mar the pleasure of their innocent triumph; but I — I shall never know even this slight happiness."

And Mlle. de Beaumesnil's grief at the thought was so poignant that she had all she could do to repress her tears.

But though these tears did not flow, her pale face betrayed such painful emotion that two generous-hearted people each noticed it in turn.

The quadrille was going on while mademoiselle abandoned herself to these gloomy reflections, and Olivier, who was dancing with Mlle. Hortense Herbaut, found himself directly opposite Ernestine, and thus in a position to observe the humiliating situation in which she

was placed, as well as the almost heart-broken expression of her face. Olivier was so deeply touched that he asked:

"Who is that young lady sitting alone over there? I have never seen her here before,.I think."

"No, M. Olivier, she is a stranger. One of mamma's friends brought her this evening."

"She is not pretty, and she doesn't seem to know anybody. At least nobody has asked her to dance. Poor little thing, how dull it must be for her!"

"If I had not been engaged for this dance, I should have stayed with her, but —"

"Of course, Mlle. Hortense, you have your duties as hostess to attend to, but I will certainly ask her to dance the next quadrille with me. I don't like to see her so neglected."

"Mother and I will both feel exceedingly grateful to you, M. Olivier. It would be a real deed of charity," said Hortense.

Almost at the same instant that Olivier first noticed Mlle. de Beaumesnil's isolation, Herminie entered the salon from the adjoining bedroom, and, walking up to one of the card-tables, leaned over the back of Madame Herbaut's chair to watch the game. From where she stood she could look straight out into the dining-room through the folding doors, and, chancing to raise her eyes, she exclaimed:

"Why, who is that young girl sitting there alone on the couch, and looking so sad?"

Madame Herbaut, glancing up from her cards, answered:

"It is a young girl one of my friends over there at the Pope Joan table brought with her this evening. She doesn't know anybody here, and, not being at all pretty, it is not surprising that she has no partner."

"But the poor child can't be allowed to sit there alone all the evening," said Herminie, "so, as I can't dance

myself, I'll try to entertain the stranger and make the time seem less tedious to her."

"It is just like you to think of doing such a kind and generous act," replied Madame Herbaut, laughing, "and I assure you I shall be very grateful to you, for Hortense and Claire have so many other duties on their hands, and I fear there isn't much likelihood of this young girl's securing any partners."

"Oh, don't worry about that, madame," replied Herminie. "I'm sure I shall be able to save her from any discomfort on that account."

"How will you do it, my dear duchess?"

"Oh, that is my affair," laughed Herminie.

And still limping slightly, — deceitful creature that she was, — she walked towards the couch on which Mlle. de Beaumesnil was sitting.

CHAPTER II.

THE DUCHESS ENTERTAINS ERNESTINE.

MLLE. DE BEAUMESNIL, on seeing Herminie approach, was so struck by her remarkable beauty that she entirely failed to notice the slight lameness which the duchess had feigned in order to avoid dancing that evening.

So what was Ernestine's surprise, when the duchess, seating herself beside her, said, in the most friendly manner:

"I am deputised by Madame Herbaut to come and keep you company for a little while, in place of her daughters, who, of course, have many duties to perform."

"So some one at least pities me," thought Mlle. de Beaumesnil, deeply humiliated.

But Herminie's voice and manner were so sweet and engaging, and the expression of her face was so kind, that Ernestine, reproaching herself for the bitterness of her first thought, replied:

"I thank you very much, mademoiselle, but I fear that by thus detaining you, I shall deprive you of the pleasure of —"

"Of dancing?" asked Herminie, smilingly. "I assure you, mademoiselle, that my foot hurts me too much this evening to permit of my enjoying myself in that way, so I trust you will grant me your companionship as a compensation for my misfortune."

"Really, mademoiselle, you quite overpower me by your kindness."

"I am only doing what you would gladly do for me, I am sure, mademoiselle, if you should see me sitting alone, as frequently happens when one attends a little entertainment like this for the first time."

"I do not believe, mademoiselle," replied Ernestine, smiling, and now made entirely at ease by these gracious advances, — "in fact, I am sure that you would never be left alone even the first time you went anywhere."

"Oh, mademoiselle, mademoiselle, it is you who are overwhelming me with compliments now," laughingly protested Herminie.

"I assure you that I am only saying what I really think," Ernestine replied so artlessly that the duchess, appreciating the artless flattery, replied:

"I thank you for your very flattering words. I am sure that they are sincere; as for their being really deserved, — that is an entirely different thing. But tell me, what do you think of our little party?"

"It is charming, mademoiselle."

"I think so, too. Everybody is so gay and animated! Each guest seems determined to make the most of every minute of time. Nor is it strange. Sunday comes only once a week for all of us here, and enjoyment is really enjoyment, while to many people it is a fatiguing occupation. Surfeited with pleasure, they do not even know what it is to be amused; and it seems to me that nothing could be more sad than to be always trying hard to amuse oneself."

"Oh, yes, it must be sad, as sad as trying to find true affection, when nobody cares for you," Ernestine answered, unconsciously revealing the thought uppermost in her mind.

There was such an intense melancholy in the girl's tone and in her face, that Herminie was deeply touched by it.

"Poor child!" she said to herself, "probably she is

not a favourite at home, and that makes her all the more sensitive to slights when she is out in company."

Something Herminie noticed just then seemed to confirm this suspicion, for the progress of the dance having brought the green-gloved youth and his partner directly opposite Ernestine, the duchess saw the favoured one cast several compassionate and rather patronising glances at the less fortunate damsel.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil also noticed these glances, and fancied that she must be an object of pity to every one. The thought, of course, wounded her deeply, so one can judge of her gratitude, when Herminie said, with a smile:

"Are you willing to waive all ceremony between us, mademoiselle?"

"Certainly."

"Well, I find it dreadfully warm here. Would you mind going with me to Madame Herbaut's chamber to stay awhile?"

"Oh, thank you, mademoiselle, thank you," exclaimed Ernestine, gratefully, rising eagerly as she spoke.

"But why do you thank me?" asked Herminie, drawing the younger girl's hand through her arm. "On the contrary, it is I who should thank you for consenting to leave the ballroom on my account."

"I thank you because I understand your motive, mademoiselle," replied Ernestine, as they entered Madame Herbaut's chamber, which they found entirely deserted.

"Well, now that we are alone, explain again why you thanked me a minute ago," said Herminie, when they had seated themselves.

"Mademoiselle, you are very generous, so you must be equally frank," began Ernestine.

"Frankness is one of my greatest virtues — or failings, mademoiselle," replied Herminie, smiling. "But why this appeal to my frankness?"

"Just now, when you asked me to accompany you here because the other room was too warm, you were impelled to do it merely by your kindness of heart. You said to yourself: 'This poor girl is neglected. No one asks her to dance because she is so unattractive. If she remains here, she will become an object of ridicule, and the knowledge will wound her deeply. I will save her from this humiliation by getting away under some pretext or other.' That was exactly what you said to yourself. Is it not so?" insisted Mlle. de Beaumesnil, making no effort to conceal her tears this time. "Confess that what I say is only the truth?"

"It is," said Herminie, with her accustomed honesty. "Why should I not admit that your unpleasant position excited my sympathy?"

"And I thank you for it," said Ernestine, offering her hand to her companion. "You have no idea how grateful I am, too, for your sincerity."

"And, as you insist upon my being perfectly frank, I must tell you that you have no idea how deeply you pained me just now," said Herminie, pressing the proffered hand cordially.

"I?"

"Yes; for when I remarked what a sad thing it must be to strive as hard for enjoyment as some people do, you replied, in accents that touched me to the heart, 'Yes, it must be as sad as trying to find true affection when nobody cares for you.' Have I not set you an example of frankness? Can you not be equally frank with me?"

"It is true, mademoiselle, that I do not seem to follow your example in this respect," said Ernestine, hesitatingly.

"Ah, well, let me ask you just one question, and pray do not attribute it to mere idle curiosity. Can it be that you do not find among your own relatives the affection you long for?"

"I am an orphan," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil, in such a touching voice that Herminie's sympathy increased.

"An orphan!" she repeated; "an orphan! Alas! I understand, for I, too —"

"You, too, are an orphan?"

"Yes."

"How glad I am!" exclaimed Ernestine, naïvely. Then thinking how cruel or, at least, how strange the remark must have sounded, she added:

"Forgive me, mademoiselle, forgive me, but —"

"Ah, I think I read your feelings in my turn," responded Herminie. "Your exclamation simply meant: 'She knows how sad the lot of an orphan is, and she will love me, perhaps. Perhaps in her I shall find the affection I have failed to find elsewhere.' Am I right?" added Herminie, offering her hand in her turn. "Have I not read your thoughts aright?"

"Yes, that is true," replied Ernestine, yielding more and more to the singular charm that pervaded her companion's every word and look. "You have been so kind to me; you seem so honest and sincere that I do indeed long for your affection, mademoiselle. It — it is an ambition only. I dare not call it a hope, for you scarcely know me," concluded Ernestine, timidly.

"But do you know me any better than I know you?"

"No, but with you it is very different."

"And why?"

"Because I am already under deep obligations to you, and yet I ask an even greater favour."

"But how do you know that I will not be very glad to give you the friendship you ask in exchange for yours? You seem to me well worthy of it," said Herminie, who, on her side, was beginning to feel an increasing fondness for Ernestine.

Then, suddenly becoming thoughtful, she added: "Do you know that this is very strange?"

"What, mademoiselle?" asked Ernestine, a little worried by the seriousness of her companion's face.

"We have known each other barely half an hour. I do not know your name, you do not know mine; yet here we are almost exchanging confidences."

"But why should you be surprised to see affection and confidence spring up suddenly between a benefactress and the person obliged, mademoiselle?" asked Ernestine, timidly, almost imploringly, as if fearing Herminie might regret the interest she had manifested in her up to this time. "I am sure nothing could bring two persons together so quickly and so closely as compassion on one side and gratitude on the other."

"I am too anxious to believe you not to yield to your arguments very readily," Herminie answered, half laughingly, half seriously.

"But my reasoning is true, mademoiselle," said Ernestine, encouraged by her success, and anxious to make her companion share her convictions; "besides, the similarity in our situations helps to bring us together. The fact that we are both orphans is surely a bond between us."

"It is indeed," said the duchess, pressing Ernestine's hand affectionately.

"Then you will really grant me your affection some day?"

"A few minutes ago, without even knowing you, I was touched by your painful position," replied Herminie. "Now I feel that I love you because it is so evident that you have a kind and noble heart."

"Oh, if you only knew what pleasure your words give me! I will never prove ungrateful, I swear it, mademoiselle!"

Then as if bethinking herself, she added, "Mademoiselle? It seems to me that it will be very difficult for me to call you that now."

"And equally difficult for me to reply in the same

ceremonious way," responded the duchess. "So call me Herminie and I will call you — "

"Ernestine."

"Ernestine," exclaimed Herminie, remembering that this was her sister's name, — the name the Comtesse de Beaumesnil had mentioned several times in the young musician's presence when speaking of her beloved daughter; "you are called Ernestine? You spoke of one bond between us just a moment ago; this is another."

"What do you mean?"

"A lady to whom I was deeply attached had a daughter who was also named Ernestine."

"You see how many reasons there are that we should love each other, Herminie," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil; "and as we are friends now, I am going to ask you all sorts of impertinent questions."

"Proceed, then!" said Herminie, smiling.

"Well, in the first place, what do you do for a living? What is your profession, Herminie?"

"I give lessons on the piano and in singing."

"How lucky your pupils are! How kind you must be to them!"

"No, indeed, I am very severe," replied the duchess, gaily. "And you, Ernestine, what do you do?"

"I — I do embroidery and tapestry work," Mlle. de Beaumesnil answered, somewhat embarrassed.

"And do you have plenty of work, my dear child?" asked Herminie, with almost maternal solicitude; "work of that kind is usually so very scarce at this season of the year."

"I came from the country only a short time ago to join my relative here," replied poor Ernestine, more and more confused; then gathering a certain amount of courage from the very exigency of the situation, she added: "So you see, Herminie, that I have never lacked work yet."

"If you ever should, I think I might be able to procure it for you, my dear Ernestine."

"You! and how?"

"I, too, have done embroidery for some of the large shops, when — well, one may surely confess it to a friend — when pupils were scarce, and I had to eke out a living in that way; so as they were very well satisfied with my work at the establishment of which I speak, — one of the largest in town by the way, — I am still on good terms with them, and feel sure that a recommendation from me would ensure you work if you need it."

"But as you embroider, too, Herminie, I should be depriving you of one of your resources, and if pupils should become scarce again, what would you do?" asked Ernestine, deeply touched by Herminie's generous offer.

"Oh, I have other resources now," answered the other girl, proudly. "I copy music, too. But the important thing, you see, Ernestine, is to be certain of work, for you, too, alas! know, perhaps, that it is not enough for those who labour for their daily bread to have energy and determination; they must have employment as well."

"Certainly, and that is very hard to find sometimes," said Ernestine, sadly, thinking for the first time of the sad lot of many young girls, and reflecting that her new friend had doubtless been in the deplorable situation of which she spoke.

"Yes, and it is terrible for one to see oneself nearing the end of one's resources, no matter how willing to work and how courageous one may be," replied Herminie, sadly. "And it is for this very reason that I will do everything in my power to spare you such misery as that, my poor Ernestine. But tell me, where do you live? I will call and see you sometime when I am out giving lessons, that is, if it is not too far out of my way, for I have to be very saving of my time."

Mlle. de Beaumesnil's embarrassment was very great,

and it was still further augmented by the painful necessity of being compelled to utter a falsehood, so it was with no little hesitation that she replied:

"I should be very glad to see you, my dear Herminie, but — but my relative — "

"Poor child, I understand," said Herminie, quickly, unconsciously coming to Ernestine's assistance. "You are not in your own home, of course, and your relative makes you painfully conscious of the fact, sometimes, perhaps."

"That is it exactly," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil, delighted with this excuse. "My relative is not bad at heart, but so peevish, and such a grumbler. I don't believe there was ever another such grumbler in the world," she added, smiling.

"That is enough for me," exclaimed Herminie, laughing in her turn. "If she's a grumbler, she'll never have a visit from me. The only way out of the difficulty, Ernestine, is for you to come and see me whenever you have time."

"I was just going to ask you to grant me that privilege."

"Yes, yes, you shall come and see how pretty my room is," said the duchess.

Then remembering that her new friend was not as comfortably housed, Herminie added:

"When I say that, I don't really mean it. My room is really very unpretentious."

But Ernestine understood Herminie's disposition and character pretty well already, so she said, smiling:

"Be honest, Herminie."

"About what?"

"Your room is charming, and you only retracted your words because you thought I would feel badly because I hadn't a room as pretty as yours."

"Do you know, Ernestine, that you would be a very dangerous person to have around if any one had a secret, for you seem to divine everything."

"I was sure of it! Your room is charming. How I shall enjoy seeing it."

"You must not say how I shall enjoy seeing it. You must say, 'Herminie, I am coming to take a glass of milk with you some morning, soon.'"

"Oh, I'll say that with all the pleasure in life."

"And I accept your offer with equal pleasure. Only when you come, Ernestine, don't let it be any later than nine o'clock, for I begin my round of lessons at ten. And now what day will you come?"

Mlle. de Beaumesnil was rescued from this embarrassing situation by Providence in the shape of a handsome non-commissioned officer of hussars, who was no other than Olivier.

Faithful to the promise made to Mlle. Herbaut, the kind-hearted fellow had come to ask Ernestine to dance the next quadrille with him, so, after having greeted Herminie in the most cordial and respectful manner, he bowed low before Ernestine, with the stereotyped phrase:

"Will mademoiselle do me the honour to dance the next quadrille with me."

CHAPTER III.

A BOLD QUESTION.

MLLE. DE BEAUMESNIL was doubly surprised, as the invitation must have been premeditated, inasmuch as she was not then in the ball-room, so having no answer ready in her astonishment, Herminie came to her assistance by saying gaily to the young soldier:

"I accept your invitation in mademoiselle's name, M. Olivier, for she is quite capable of depriving herself of the pleasure of dancing merely to keep me company."

"As mademoiselle has accepted for me," added Ernestine, smiling, "I can but follow her example."

Olivier bowed again, and turning to Herminie remarked:

"Unfortunately I arrived very late this evening, mademoiselle, for I found you had not only ceased playing, but had also abandoned all idea of dancing."

"You did come very late, M. Olivier, for I recollect seeing you come in at the conclusion of the last polka I played."

"Alas! mademoiselle, you see in me a victim of my own patience and another's unpunctuality. I was waiting for a friend who intended to come with me."

Herminie blushed slightly and averted her eyes.

"But this friend did not come," Olivier added.

"Possibly he is ill, M. Olivier," said the duchess, with feigned indifference.

"No, mademoiselle, he is perfectly well, for I saw him only a few hours ago, but I think his mother must have

detained him, for the kind-hearted fellow never opposes her in anything."

The words seemed to dispel the slight cloud which had gathered, now and then, on the brow of the duchess during the evening, and she answered, gaily:

"Then you do very wrong to blame your friend if he has such a good excuse for his absence, M. Olivier."

"I am not blaming him in the least, Mlle. Herminie. I am only pitying him for not having come, and pitying myself for arriving so late, as I might, perhaps, have had the pleasure of dancing with mademoiselle sooner," added Olivier, addressing Mlle. de Beaumesnil, so she would not feel that she was left out of the conversation.

Suddenly the words, "Take your places!" resounded through the room, accompanied by a few chords on the piano.

"I am at your service, mademoiselle," said Olivier, offering his arm to Ernestine.

The girl arose to accompany Olivier, but Herminie caught her by the hand, and whispered:

"One moment, Ernestine, let me arrange your sash. It needs pinning."

And the duchess, with charming solicitude, straightened a disordered fold in the sash, fastened it with a pin she took from her own girdle, smoothed out a slight wrinkle in Ernestine's corsage, — rendered her, in short, all those little kindly services which two devoted sisters are always performing for each other.

"Now, mademoiselle," remarked Herminie, with kindly gravity, after another brief survey of Ernestine's toilet, "I will let you go and dance, but you must promise to enjoy yourself immensely."

Mlle. de Beaumesnil was so touched by Herminie's little attentions that, before accepting Olivier's arm, she found an opportunity to imprint a light kiss on the cheek of the duchess, and whisper:

"Thanks again! Many, many thanks!"

And really happy for the first time since her mother's death, Ernestine left Herminie, took the arm Olivier offered, and accompanied him into the ball-room.

The young hussar was remarkably handsome and distinguished-looking, cordial in his manner towards men, and extremely deferential to women. This, together with the fact that he wore his showy uniform, decorated with the cross he had so bravely won, with easy grace, made him a great favourite at Madame Herbaut's entertainments, so Ernestine excited not a little envy and jealousy when she appeared in the ball-room on Olivier's arm.

Even the most artless and ingenuous women are quick to discern the effect they produce upon other women.

And in Mlle. de Beaumesnil's case, these powers of penetration were united with a firm determination to observe every incident of the evening with the closest attention, so, on perceiving the envy which Olivier's preference excited, the young girl's gratitude increased.

She did not doubt in the least that Olivier, out of the kindness of his heart, had wished to avenge the painful, almost humiliating slight she had received earlier in the evening, and a natural feeling of gratitude made Mlle. de Beaumesnil treat Olivier with less reserve, perhaps, than was quite proper in the extremely delicate position in which she was placed.

Olivier, in promising Mlle. Herbaut that he would ask Ernestine to dance, had merely yielded to a generous impulse, for, seeing Mlle. de Beaumesnil such a long way off, he had thought her almost ugly. He had never exchanged a word with her, he did not know whether she was clever or stupid, so, glad to find a topic of conversation in the warm friendship that seemed to exist between Herminie and Ernestine, he remarked to the latter, in one of the pauses of the dance:

"You seem to know Mlle. Herminie very well, mademoiselle. What a charming young lady she is!"

"I agree with you perfectly, monsieur, though I met Mlle. Herminie this evening for the first time."

"Indeed!"

"Our sudden intimacy surprises you, does it not, monsieur? But why should it? Sometimes the richest are the most generous. They do not wait to be asked; they offer their largess to you of their own accord. That was the case with Herminie this evening."

"I understand, mademoiselle. You knew no one here, and Mlle. Herminie —"

"Seeing me alone, had the goodness to come to me. This can not surprise you very much, however."

"Why not, mademoiselle?"

"Because a moment ago you, monsieur, were actuated by the same charitable impulse in asking me to dance."

"Charitable? What an expression to use in this connection, mademoiselle!"

"It is the right one, however."

"Quite the contrary, mademoiselle."

"Come, admit it, monsieur. You ought always to tell the truth, you know."

"Frankly, mademoiselle," responded Olivier, smiling in his turn, "should I be performing an act of charity — allow me to make this comparison — in culling a forgotten or unseen flower?"

"Say, rather, a rejected one."

"So be it, mademoiselle. But might this not merely show the poor taste of a person who would prefer a big red poppy to a modest violet."

And Olivier cast a laughing glance at the buxom lass whose gaudy attire did seem to justify the comparison.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil could not help smiling, but she answered, with a shake of the head:

"Ah, monsieur, kind as your reply is, it proves that I am doubly right."

"How is that, mademoiselle?"

"You took compassion on me, and you still have

sufficient compassion to be unwilling to admit the fact."

"You do right to insist upon frankness, mademoiselle. It is a thousand times better than compliments."

"And what I certainly expect of you, monsieur."

"Well, yes, mademoiselle; seeing that you were the only person not dancing, I thought how dull it must be for you, and I resolved to engage you for the next quadrille. I hope my sincerity has not offended you, but you insisted — "

"Certainly, monsieur; and I am so grateful for your sincerity that if I dared — "

"Do not hesitate, I beg of you, mademoiselle."

"But no, however frank you may be, however great a lover of truth, your sincerity, I am sure, would not exceed certain limits — "

"Those you yourself prescribe, mademoiselle; no others."

"Are you in earnest?'

"I am, I assure you."

"The question I am about to put to you, monsieur, will seem so peculiar, so bold, perhaps."

"Then, mademoiselle, I shall tell you that it seems strange and bold, that is all."

"I don't think I shall ever dare — "

"Ah, mademoiselle, you seem to be afraid of frankness, in your turn," said Olivier, laughing.

"Say, rather, that I tremble for your sincerity; it will have to be so great, so rare, to stand my test."

"You need have no fears, I will vouch for it, mademoiselle."

"Well, monsieur, what do you think of my appearance?"

"Mademoiselle," stammered Olivier, who was not in the least prepared for such a brusque and embarrassing question; "really — I — "

"Ah, you see that you dare not say what you think,

monsieur," exclaimed Ernestine, gaily. "But wait, to put you quite at your ease, let us suppose that on leaving this entertainment you should meet one of your friends, and in telling him about the young ladies you danced with, what would you say about me if you should happen to remember that I was one of your partners?"

"Well, mademoiselle," responded Olivier, who had partially recovered from his surprise, "I should merely say to my friend, 'I saw a young lady whom nobody asked to dance. This interested me in her, so I engaged her for the next quadrille, not supposing that our conversation would prove particularly interesting, for not knowing the young lady at all, I had nothing but commonplaces to say to her. But quite the contrary. Thanks to my partner, our conversation was extremely animated, and the time passed like a dream.'"

"And what if your friend should perhaps ask if this young lady was pretty or ugly?"

"I should say that I had not been able to distinguish her features very well from a distance," replied Olivier, intrepidly, "but on seeing her closer, and looking at her more attentively, and more particularly after I had heard her talk, I found her face so gentle and kind and characterised by such an expression of winning frankness that I ceased to think that she was not pretty. But I should add, still speaking to my friend, of course: 'Do not repeat these remarks made to you in confidence, for it is only women of great good sense and amiability who ask for, or forgive, sincerity.' It is consequently only to a very discreet friend that I should say this, mademoiselle."

"I thank you so much, monsieur. I am grateful, you have no idea how grateful, for your frankness," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil, in such a sincere and earnest voice that Olivier, surprised and touched in spite of himself, gazed at the girl with lively interest.

Just then the dance ended, and Olivier took Ernestine back to Herminie, who was waiting for her; then, im-

pressed by the singular character of the young girl with whom he had just danced, he withdrew himself a little apart to think over their strange conversation.

"You enjoyed yourself very much, did you not, Ernestine?" asked Herminie, affectionately. "I knew it by your face. You talked all the time you were dancing."

"M. Olivier is very pleasant; besides, knowing that you were so well acquainted with him made me feel perfect confidence in him at once."

"And he deserves it, I assure you, Ernestine. No one could have a better heart or a nobler character. His most intimate friend" — and the duchess blushed almost imperceptibly — "tells me that M. Olivier works like a slave at the most uncongenial employment in order to utilise his leave and assist his uncle, a retired officer of marines, crippled with wounds, who resides in this same house and has only his pension to live on."

"This doesn't surprise me at all, Herminie. I knew that M. Olivier must have a kind heart."

"He is as brave as a lion, too, with it all. His friend, who served in the same regiment, has told me of many deeds of wonderful valour on M. Olivier's part."

"That seems only natural to me. I have always believed that good and kind-hearted people were the bravest," replied Ernestine. "You, for example, must be very courageous, Herminie."

The conversation between the two young girls was again interrupted by a young man, who, after interchanging a quick glance with Herminie, politely invited Ernestine to dance.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil saw the look, and it made her blush and smile. Nevertheless, she made an engagement to dance the next quadrille, but as soon as the young man had walked away Ernestine gaily remarked to her new friend:

"You are making me a very dangerous person, my dear Herminie."

"Why do you say that, Ernestine?"

"That invitation I just received —"

"Well, what of it?"

"Was all your work."

"Mine?"

"Yes, you said to yourself, 'This poor Ernestine must, at least, dance twice during the evening. Everybody is not as kind-hearted as M. Olivier, but I am queen here, and I will give orders to one of my subjects.'"

But just then Queen Herminie's subject came to say that the quadrille was forming.

"Good-bye, Madame Sybil," exclaimed Herminie, shaking her finger threateningly at Mlle. de Beaumesnil. "I'll teach you not to be so proud of your wonderful powers of divination."

The young girl had scarcely walked away with her partner before Olivier came up, and, seating himself beside the duchess, said:

"Who is that young girl I just danced with?"

"An orphan who supports herself by her embroidery, M. Olivier, and who is not very happy, I think, for you can not imagine the touching way in which she thanked me for my attention this evening. It was this that made us friends so quickly, for I never saw her until to-night."

"That is what she meant, I suppose, by speaking so artlessly of what she called your compassion, and mine."

"Poor child! She must have been very unkindly treated, and is still, perhaps, to make her so grateful for the slightest show of interest."

"Hers is certainly a very original character. You can't imagine what a strange question she asked me, imploring me to be perfectly frank all the while."

"No, I can not."

"Well, she asked me whether I thought her pretty or ugly."

"What a strange child! And what did you answer?"

"I told her the truth, as she insisted."

"What! M. Olivier, did you really tell her that she wasn't pretty?"

"I certainly did, adding, however, — and that, too, was the truth, — that she had such a frank and gentle manner that it made one quite forget that she was not pretty."

"Great heavens! M. Olivier," cried Herminie, almost in affright, "that wasn't a pleasant thing for her to hear. And she did not seem hurt?"

"Not the least bit in the world. Quite the contrary, in fact, and that was what surprised me so much. When one asks questions of this nature, a request to be frank generally means that you are to lie; while she thanked me in such an earnest and pathetic way for my sincerity that I was really touched, in spite of myself."

"Do you know what I think, M. Olivier? I really believe the poor child must have been very unkindly treated at home. She must have been told a hundred times that she was a monster of ugliness, and, finding herself for the first time in her life with some one she really felt that she could trust, she wanted to know the truth in regard to herself."

"You are probably right, Mlle. Herminie, and what touched me, as it did you, was to see with what gratitude the poor girl welcomed the slightest sign of interest, provided it was sincere."

"Would you believe it, I have seen big tears well up in her eyes more than once this evening, M. Olivier?"

"I, too, somehow fancied that her gaiety concealed a habitual melancholy. She was trying to forget herself, perhaps."

"And then her trade, which unfortunately requires such an expenditure of time and labour, is so unremunerative, poor child! If the trials of poverty should be added to her other troubles — "

"I fear that is only too probable, Mlle. Herminie,"

said Olivier, feelingly. "She is, indeed, very much to be pitied!"

"Hush, here she comes," said Herminie. Then she added: "But she is putting on her wrap; they must be taking her away."

And in fact, Ernestine, behind whom Madame Laîné was walking with an imposing air, came to the door, and made a slight movement of the head to Herminie as if to indicate that she was leaving with regret.

The duchess hastened to her new friend. "What! you are going already?" she asked.

"I must," answered Ernestine, with a meaning look at innocent Madame Laîné.

"But you will come next Sunday, will you not? You know we shall have a thousand things to say to each other."

"I hope to come, my dear Herminie, I shall be so anxious to see you again."

Then with a gracious bow to the young hussar, Ernestine said:

"*Au revoir*, M. Olivier."

"*Au revoir*, mademoiselle," replied the young soldier, with a bow.

An hour afterwards Mlle. de Beaumesnil and Madame Laîné were safe within the walls of the Hôtel de la Rochaiguë.

CHAPTER IV.

REASON ASSERTS ITSELF.

On her return from Madame Herbaut's little entertainment, mademoiselle opened her journal and wrote as follows:

"Thank Heaven, my darling mamma; the inspiration to which I yielded was a wise one!

"What a cruel lesson I received at first, then how much valuable information, and lastly what delightful compensation!

"Two persons with true, honest hearts manifested a genuine interest in me.

"A genuine, unselfish interest this time, for these persons, at least, have not even a suspicion that I am the richest heiress in France.

"On the contrary, they believe me to be poor, almost on the verge of absolute want, in fact; and then, what is more, they have been perfectly honest with me. I know it, I am certain of it!

"Judge of my happiness! I have met some one at last whom I feel I can trust, I, who have come to distrust everybody and everything, thanks to the fulsome flattery of those around me.

"At last I know what I am really worth — how I really appear in the eyes of others.

"I am far from pretty; there is nothing in the world about me worthy of the slightest notice. I am one of those persons who must pass through life unnoticed unless some compassionate heart should be touched by my naturally gentle and rather melancholy ways.

"The feeling I must really inspire, if I inspire any feeling at all, is that sort of affectionate commiseration that truly noble souls feel when they are brought into close contact with an inoffensive creature who is suffering from some hidden sorrow.

"If this commiseration ever attracts one of these noble natures to me, what it will find and love in me is sweetness of disposition combined with an intense longing for mutual sincerity.

"This, then, is precisely what I am, — nothing less, nothing more!

"And when I compare these slight attractions, the only ones I possess, with the marvellous charms and perfections with which my flatterers have endowed me; when I think of the sudden and irresistible passions I have inspired in persons who have scarcely exchanged a word with me; when I think of the sensation I create in fashionable circles, and then think of the modest entertainment this evening, where I was invited to dance only from a feeling of pity, and where I saw all the other young girls chosen in preference to me, because I was the least attractive one present, — oh, mother, I, who never hated any one in my whole life before, now feel that I hate as deeply as I despise these persons who have so shamefully deceived me by their base flattery.

"I am astonished at all the bitter, insolent, and opprobrious epithets which occur to me, and with which I long to crush my deceivers some day, or, rather, when a test to which I mean to subject them at that grand ball next Thursday has wholly convinced me of their deceitfulness and treachery.

"Alas! my dear mother, suppose any one had told me a short time ago that I, who am naturally so timid, should make such a bold resolve some day!

"But the necessity of escaping the greatest of misfortunes imparts courage and determination even to the most timid.

"But, as I have said before, my dear mother, the cruel lesson I received was not without its compensations.

"In the first place, I have gained, I am sure, a generous and sincere friend. Seeing me slighted and neglected, a charming young girl took pity on me. She came to me, and endeavoured to console me with wonderful cleverness and kindness.

"I felt, or, rather, I feel, for her the tenderest gratitude.

"Oh, if you only knew, mother, how novel and pleasant and delightful it was for me, the richest heiress in France, to find some one who, upon seeing me neglected, and, as she supposed, unhappy, on that very account manifests the most touching interest in me, — who, in short, loves me for myself alone.

"To be sought out and to be loved on account of your supposed misfortunes, what ineffable happiness this is to a person who, up to that time, has been loved, apparently, only on account of the wealth she is known to possess.

"The sincere affection I have gained this time is unspeakably precious to me, because it gives me the hope of such a happy future. With a tried and trusted friend, what have I to fear? Ah, I have no fear of seeing this friend change some day when I tell her who I really am!

"What I have said in regard to Herminie, for that is her name, also applies to M. Olivier, who might be taken for this young girl's brother, so great is his kindness of heart and his honesty. Seeing that no one had asked me to dance, it was he who invited me out of pity, and so great is his frankness that he did not deny that he was actuated by motives of compassion. Moreover, when I had the hardihood to ask him if he thought me pretty, he replied that he did not, but that I had a face which was interesting by reason of its gentle, rather sad expression.

"These honest words gave me inexpressible pleasure and satisfaction. I felt that they were true, for they

reminded me of what you said to me once, my beloved mother, when you were speaking of my looks; besides, the words were addressed, not to the wealthy heiress, but to the little embroideress.

"M. Olivier is only a common soldier, I know; but he must have received an excellent education, for he expresses himself admirably and his manners are perfect. Besides, he is as kind-hearted and good as he is brave, for he evinces a truly filial devotion for his aged uncle, a retired naval officer.

"Oh, mother, what noble and courageous natures these are! How entirely at ease one feels with them! How their frankness and sincerity rejoices one's heart! How healthy and wholesome to the soul such association is! What serenity and cheerful resignation they display under adverse circumstances, for both these young people are obliged to work hard, — Herminie, for a mere subsistence; M. Olivier, to increase his old uncle's inadequate means.

"To work for a living!

"And yet Herminie told me if work should fail me at any time she would do her best to secure me employment from a large establishment for which she had occasionally worked herself, for I had no idea yet what a dreadful thing it was to be out of work.

"To be out of work!

"Great Heavens, that means to lack food! That means want, misery, death itself, perhaps!

"All the merry, laughing girls I saw at this little entertainment, girls who are, like Herminie, dependent entirely upon their own exertions for a livelihood, may know all the horrors of abject want to-morrow, if work should fail them!

"Is there no one to whom they can go and say, 'I am brave and willing, only give me work?'

"But such a state of things is unjust!' It is shameful! Is there no such thing as pity for the woes of

others in the world? Is it a matter of little or no consequence that there should be so many people in the world who do not know whether they will have food on the morrow?

"Oh, mother, mother, now I understand the vague fear and uneasiness I experienced when they told me I was so rich! I had good reason to say to myself, with something akin to remorse:

"Such vast wealth for myself alone? And why?

"Why should I have so much and others nothing?

"How did I acquire this immense fortune?

"Alas! I acquired it only by your death, my mother, and by your death, my father.

"So I had to lose those I held most dear in the world in order to become so rich.

"In order that I may be so rich, it is necessary, perhaps, that thousands of young girls like Herminie should be always in danger of want, — happy to-day, filled with despair to-morrow.

"And when they have lost their only treasures, the lightheartedness and gaiety of youth, when they are old, and when not only work, but strength is lacking, what becomes of these unfortunates?

"Oh, mother, the more I think of the terrible difference between my lot and that of Herminie and so many other young girls — the more I think of the dangers that surround me, of all the nefarious schemes of which I am the object because I am rich, it seems to me that wealth imparts a strange bitterness to the heart.

"Now my reason has at last asserted itself, I must satisfy myself of the omnipotent power of wealth over venal souls; I must see to what depths of degradation I, a girl of sixteen, can make those around me stoop. Yes, for my eyes are open now. I realise with profound gratitude that M. de Maillefort's revelations alone started this train of thought that is making everything more and more clear to me every minute.

"I do not know, but it seems to me, my dear mother, that I can express my thoughts more clearly now, that my mind is developing, that my faculties are awakening from a sort of stupor, that my character is undergoing a decided change in many respects, and that, while it remains keenly susceptible to all that is sincere and generous, it is becoming strongly antagonistic and aggressive to all that is false, base and mercenary.

"I am convinced of one thing: they lied to me when they told me that M. de Maillefort was your enemy. They told me so merely because they wanted to make me distrust his counsels. It was designedly that they fostered my dislike of him, a dislike caused by the slanders of which I have been the dupe.

"No, never shall I forget that it was to M. de Maillefort's revelations that I was indebted for the idea of going to Madame Herbaut's, where I not only learned the truth concerning myself, but where I met the only two really generous and sincere persons that I have known since I lost you, my father, and you, my mother."

The morning after Madame Herbaut's ball Mlle. de Beaumesnil rang for her governess a little earlier than usual.

Madame Laîné appeared almost instantly, however.

"Did mademoiselle have a comfortable night?" she asked.

"Very, my dear Laîné; but tell me, have you made the inquiries I asked you to last evening, so we may know whether any one suspected our absence."

"No one has the slightest suspicion of it, mademoiselle. Madame de la Rochaiguë did not send to inquire for you until early this morning."

"And you replied?"

"That mademoiselle had passed a very comfortable, though slightly restless, night; but that the quiet and rest had benefited mademoiselle very much."

"That is all right then, my dear Laîné, and now I have another favour to ask of you."

"I am at mademoiselle's service; but I am so distressed about what happened at Madame Herbaut's last night," said the governess. "I was in torture the whole evening."

"But what happened at Madame Herbaut's?"

"Why, mademoiselle was received with such coldness and indifference. It was shameful, for mademoiselle is in the habit of seeing everybody crowd around her as they ought."

"As they ought?"

"Most assuredly. Mademoiselle knows very well the respect that is due to her position, so last evening I was mortified and incensed beyond expression. 'Ah,' I said to myself, 'if you only knew that this young lady you are neglecting is Mlle. de Beaumesnil, you would all be down on your knees in the twinkling of an eye.'"

"My dear Laîné, let me first set your mind at rest about last evening. I was delighted, and I enjoyed myself so much that I intend to go again next Sunday evening."

"What, mademoiselle wishes to go again?"

"I shall go, that is decided. Now, another thing. The reception which I met with at Madame Herbaut's, and which scandalises you so deeply, is convincing proof of the discretion I expected from you. I thank you for it, and if you always act in this way I assure you your fortune is made."

"But mademoiselle knows that it is not self-interest—that—"

"Yet that need not prevent me from rewarding you as you deserve, my dear Laîné. And that is not all; I want you to ask Madame Herbaut for the address of one of the young ladies I met last evening. The young lady I mean is called Herminie, and she gives music lessons."

"I shall not have to apply to Madame Herbaut for

that, mademoiselle, M. le baron's steward knows the address."

"What! Our steward knows Mlle. Herminie's address?" exclaimed Ernestine, greatly astonished.

"Yes, mademoiselle. They were speaking of the young lady in the office only a few days ago."

"Of Mlle. Herminie?"

"Yes, mademoiselle. It was in relation to a five hundred franc note that she returned to the baroness. Louis, one of the footmen, heard the whole conversation through the door of the reception-room."

"Madame de la Rochaiguë knows Herminie?" cried Ernestine, whose surprise and curiosity were increased by each word the governess uttered. "And what is this about a five hundred franc note?"

"Why, it seems that this honest young girl — I told you that Madame Herbaut was exceedingly particular in the selection of her guests — this honest young girl returned the five hundred francs because she said she had already been paid by the countess."

"What countess?"

"Why, mademoiselle's mother."

"My mother paid Herminie? And for what?"

"Ah, yes, it is true that mademoiselle is not aware — I suppose no one has told mademoiselle for fear of making her still more sad."

"Has not told me what? In Heaven's name, speak!"

"Why, the late countess suffered so much towards the last, that the physicians, at their wit's end, thought that music might ameliorate her sufferings, at least to some extent."

"Great Heaven! I can not believe it. Go on, go on."

"So they sent for a young musician, and this young musician was Herminie!"

"Herminie?"

"Yes, mademoiselle. For ten days or a fortnight before Madame la comtesse died, mademoiselle came to

play and sing to her every day, and they say it quieted the countess very much, but unfortunately it was too late."

While Ernestine was drying the tears these sad details, hitherto unknown to her, had brought to her eyes, Madame Laîné continued:

"It seems that, after your mother's death, the baroness, thinking Mlle. Herminie had not been paid, sent her five hundred francs, but this noble-hearted young girl brought the money back and declared that the countess owed her nothing."

"She saw my dying mother! She assuaged her sufferings," thought Ernestine, with inexpressible emotion. "Ah, how I long to tell her that I am the daughter of the lady she loved, for how could any one know my mother without loving her?"

Then starting violently at another recollection, the young girl said to herself:

"But I remember now, that, when I told her my name was Ernestine, the coincidence seemed to strike her, and she seemed to be deeply moved when she said that a lady, for whom she had a profound regard, had a daughter who was also named Ernestine. So my mother must have talked to her about me, and if my mother talked to her as confidentially as that, my mother must have loved her; so I, too, have reason to love her. In fact, it is my bounden duty. My brain whirls, my heart overflows. This is too much happiness. I can hardly believe it."

Dashing away her tears, Ernestine turned to her governess and asked:

"But how did the steward ascertain Mlle. Herminie's address."

"He went to the notary who sent the five hundred francs, for Madame de la Rochaiguë wished to ascertain the address so she could send it to M. de Maillefort."

"What, does M. de Maillefort, too, know Herminie?"

"I cannot say, mademoiselle, all I know is that the steward took Herminie's address to M. le marquis nearly a month ago."

"Get me the address at once, my dear Laîné."

In a few minutes the governess brought the address and Ernestine immediately sat down and wrote as follows:

"MY DEAR HERMINIE: — You invited me to come and see your pretty room. I shall come early day after to-morrow — Tuesday, early in the morning, so I may be sure of not interfering in your work. I look forward with delight to seeing you again. I have a thousand things to tell you. With love,

"Your sincere friend,

"ERNESTINE."

After she had sealed this note, Mlle. de Beaumesnil said to her governess:

"I wish you to post this letter yourself, my dear Laîné."

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"How shall I manage to get out alone with Madame Laîné day after to-morrow?" Ernestine said to herself. "I have no idea, but my heart tells me that I shall see Herminie again!"

CHAPTER V.

A CONSUMING FEVER OF LOVE.

On the morning of the same day that mademoiselle had appointed for her visit to Herminie, Gerald de Senneterre was having a long conversation with Olivier.

The two young men were sitting under the little arbour of which Commander Bernard was so fond.

The young duke's face was extremely pale and agitated. In fact, he seemed a prey to the deepest anxiety and distress.

"So you will see her, my dear Olivier," he was saying to his friend.

"At once. I wrote to her last evening requesting an interview. She has not answered my note, so she consents."

"Then in an hour my fate will be decided," groaned Gerald.

"I am forced to admit that I think this a very serious matter," said Olivier. "You know, even better than I do, how proud this young girl is, and that which would be our greatest chance of success with any one else will be almost sure to have an exactly opposite effect in her case. Still, we will not despair."

"But, Olivier, if I should be obliged to give her up, I don't know how I could bear it!" exclaimed Gerald, hoarsely. "I should kill myself, I believe!"

"Gerald! Gerald!"

"Yes, I admit it. I love her to distraction. I never

believed before that even the most impassioned love could attain such a degree of intensity. My love is a consuming fever, — a fixed idea that absorbs me utterly. You know Herminie — "

"Yes, and I know that a more noble and beautiful creature never lived."

"Olivier, I am the most miserable of men!" exclaimed Gerald, burying his face in his hands.

"Come, come, Gerald, don't give way so. You can rely upon me. I believe, too, that you can trust her. Does she not love you as much as you love her? So don't be despondent. On the contrary, hope, and if, unfortunately — "

"But I tell you that I can not and will not live without her."

There was such evident sincerity in the words, as well as such passionate resolve, that Olivier shuddered, for he knew what an indomitable will his former comrade possessed.

"Gerald," he said, with deep emotion, "again I tell you that you should not despair. Wait here until my return."

"You are right," said Gerald, passing his hand across his fevered brow. "I will wait for you."

Olivier, unwilling to leave his friend in such a despondent mood, continued:

"I forgot to tell you that I informed my uncle of your intentions in regard to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and they have his unqualified approval. 'Such conduct is worthy of him,' he said to me, so day after to-morrow, Gerald — "

"Day after to-morrow!" exclaimed the young duke, bitterly and impatiently. "I am not thinking of anything so far off. It is as much as I can do to see my way from hour to hour."

"But, Gerald, it is a duty you have to perform."

"Don't talk to me about anything but Herminie. I

am utterly indifferent to everything else. What are these so-called duties and obligations to me when I am in torture?"

"You do not realise what you are saying."

"Yes, I do."

"No, you do not."

"Olivier!"

"Oh, you may rebel as much as you please, but I tell you that your conduct, now as ever, shall be that of a man of honour. You will go to this ball to meet Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"I'll be d——d if I will. I am at liberty to do as I please, I think, monsieur."

"No, Gerald, you are not at liberty to do anything that is dishonest or dishonourable."

"Do you know that what you are saying—" began the young duke, pale with anger; but seeing the expression of sorrowful astonishment on Olivier's features, Gerald became ashamed of his outburst, and, extending his hand to his friend, he said, in an almost beseeching voice:

"Forgive me, Olivier, forgive me! To think that almost at the very moment that you are undertaking the gravest and most delicate mission for me, I should so far forget myself—"

"Come, come, you needn't go to making excuses," said Olivier, preventing his friend from continuing by affectionately pressing his hand.

"You must have compassion on me, Olivier," said Gerald, despondently. "I really believe I must be mad."

The conversation was here interrupted by the sudden arrival of Madame Barbançon, who rushed into the arbour, crying:

"Oh, M. Olivier, M. Olivier!"

"What is the matter, Madame Barbançon?"

"The commander!"

"Well?"

"He has gone out!"

"What, suffering as he is to-day!" exclaimed Olivier, anxiously. "It was very imprudent. Didn't you try to prevent him from going, Mother Barbançon?"

"Alas! M. Olivier, I really believe the commander is not in his right mind."

"What?"

"I was out, and it was the porter who admitted M. Gerald in my absence. When I returned a few minutes ago, M. Bernard was laughing and singing, and I really believe even dancing, in spite of his weakness, and at last he flung his arms around me, shouting like a maniac, 'Victory, Mother Barbançon, victory!'"

Gerald, in spite of his own troubles, could not repress a faint smile. It seemed as if he understood the cause of the old officer's delight, but when Olivier, who was really much disturbed, asked, "Do you know anything about this, Gerald?" the young duke replied, with the most natural air in the world:

"Nothing whatever, upon my word! It seems to me more than probable, though, that the commander must have heard some good news, and there would be certainly nothing alarming about that."

"Good news!" repeated Olivier, much surprised, and trying in vain to imagine what it could be.

"Well, this much is certain," interposed Madame Barbançon, "after the commander had shouted 'Victory!' almost at the top of his voice, he asked: 'Is Olivier in the garden?' 'Yes, with M. Gerald,' I replied. 'Then get me my hat and cane quick, Mother Barbançon,' said he, 'and let me get off as soon as I can.' 'What! you are going out, weak as you are?' I exclaimed. 'You are very foolish to think of such a thing, monsieur.' But the commander wouldn't listen, and clapped his hat on his head and started as if he intended to come out here and speak to you; then he stopped short, and after

reflecting a moment retraced his steps and went out at the front door, singing that miserable old song he sings only when he is in high glee about something, — which doesn't often happen with the poor, dear man!"

"I don't know what to make of it," said Olivier, "and I can't help feeling a little uneasy. My uncle has seemed so feeble since his last attack, that a half hour in the garden yesterday exhausted him completely."

"Oh, don't be alarmed, my friend, joy never kills."

"I think I had better go down the street a little way, M. Olivier," said Madame Barbançon. "He has an idea that exercise outside will do him more good than his walks in the garden, and perhaps I shall find him down there. But what on earth could he have meant by his 'Victory, Mother Barbançon, victory!' He must have heard something new in favour of his Bû-û-onaparte."

And the worthy woman hastened off.

"Don't be uneasy, Olivier," said Gerald, kindly. "The worst that can happen is that the commander may tire himself a little."

The clock in the neighbouring steeple struck nine, and Olivier, remembering the mission he had promised to fulfil, said:

"Well, it is nine o'clock. I am going."

"My dear Olivier," said Gerald, "you forget your own anxieties in your solicitude for my interests; and I, in my selfishness, haven't said so much as a word to you about your sweetheart."

"What sweetheart?"

"Why, the young girl you met at Madame Herbaut's Sunday."

"I would that your love affair were as tranquil as mine, Gerald; that is, if you can dignify with that name the interest one naturally feels in a young girl who is neither happy nor at all pretty, but who has a sweet face, an excellent disposition, and great originality of character."

"But you are thinking of this poor girl a great deal of the time, it seems to me."

"That is true, though I really don't know why. If I find out I will tell you. But never mind me. You have just displayed a vast amount of heroism in forgetting your own passion long enough to interest yourself in what you are pleased to call my love affair," said Olivier, smiling. "This generosity on your part is sure to be rewarded, so courage, my friend! Keep up a good heart and wait for me here.".

Herminie, for her part, was thinking of Olivier's approaching visit with a vague uneasiness that cast a slight cloud over her usually radiant face.

"What can M. Olivier want?" thought the duchess. "This is the first time he has ever asked to call on me, and he wishes to see me on a very important matter, he says in his note. This important matter cannot concern him. What if it should concern Gerald, who is his most intimate friend? But I saw Gerald only yesterday, and I shall see him again to-day, for it is to-morrow that he is to tell his mother of our love. I can't imagine why the idea of this approaching interview worries me so. But that reminds me, I must inform the portress that I am at home to M. Olivier."

As she spoke, she pulled a bell that communicated with the room of Madame Moufflon, the portress, who promptly responded to the summons.

"Madame Moufflon, some one will call to see me this morning, and you are to admit the visitor," said Herminie.

"If it is a lady, of course. I understand."

"But it is not a lady who will call this morning," replied Herminie, with some embarrassment.

"It is not a lady? Then it must be that little hunchback I have orders to admit at any time, I suppose."

"No, Madame Moufflon, it is not M. de Maillefort, but a young man."

"A young man?" exclaimed the portress, "a young man? Well, this is the first time —"

"The young man will tell you his name. It is Olivier."

"Olivier? That is not hard to remember. I'll just think of olives; I adore them! Olivier, olives, olive oil — it is very nearly the very same thing. I sha'n't forget it. But, by the way, speaking — not of young men, for this old serpent isn't young — I saw that old scoundrel hanging around the house again last evening."

"Again?" exclaimed Herminie, with a look of scorn and disgust at the thought of Ravil.

For this cynic, since his first meeting with Herminie, had made numerous attempts to see the young girl, but the portress proving above bribery, he had written several times to Herminie, who had treated his letters with the disdain they deserved.

"Yes, mademoiselle, I saw the old snake hanging around again yesterday," continued the portress, "and when I planted myself in the doorway to watch him, he sneered at me as he passed, but I just said to myself: 'Sneer away, you old viper. You'll laugh on the other side of your mouth one of these days.'"

"I cannot help encountering this man on the street sometimes," said Herminie, "for he seems to be always trying to put himself in my way; but I needn't tell you, Madame Moufflon, that he must never be admitted to the house on any pretext whatever."

"Oh, you needn't worry about that, mademoiselle, he knows pretty well who he has to deal with by this time."

"But I forgot to mention that a young lady will probably call this morning, too, Madame Moufflon."

"Very well. But if M. Olivier should be here when the young lady calls, what then? Shall I admit her just the same?"

"Certainly."

"Oh, I never told you, did I, mademoiselle, that M. Bouffard, who was so rough to you, but who has been

as gentle as a lamb ever since you began giving his daughter lessons, is always praising you to the skies now. He said to me only the other day, 'There are plenty of *rosières* who are not half as good and modest as Mlle. Herminie. She is a young lady who —'"

But a peal of the door-bell put a sudden end to these eulogiums.

"It is M. Olivier, I expect," said Herminie. "Show him in, please, Madame Moufflon."

And a minute afterwards that worthy dame ushered in Olivier, and Herminie found herself alone with Gerald's intimate friend.

CHAPTER VI.

A DELICATE MISSION.

THE vague uneasiness which Herminie had felt was greatly increased at the sight of Olivier, for the young man looked unusually grave. The duchess even fancied that he avoided her gaze, as if embarrassed, and this embarrassment on his part was made still more apparent by his silence and evident reluctance to explain the object of his visit.

Herminie was the first to break this silence.

"You wrote, M. Olivier, that you wished to see me about a very important matter," she said, at last.

"Very important, mademoiselle."

"I judge so from your manner. What have you to tell me?"

"It concerns Gerald, mademoiselle."

"Great Heavens! What misfortune has befallen him?" exclaimed the duchess, much frightened.

"None, mademoiselle. I left him only a few minutes ago."

Herminie, thus reassured, felt deeply incensed with herself for her unguarded exclamation, and, blushing deeply, she said to Olivier:

"I trust you will not misinterpret —"

But the natural frankness of her character asserted itself, and she said, with quiet dignity:

"But why should I try to conceal from you something that you know already, M. Olivier. Are you not Gerald's

dearest friend, in fact, almost a brother to him? Neither of us have any cause to blush for our mutual attachment. To-morrow, he is to inform his mother of his intentions and ask her consent, which he is almost certain to gain. For why should he not gain it. Our conditions in life are almost identical. He supports himself by his own exertions, as I support myself by mine. Our lot will be humble, and — But, forgive me, M. Olivier, for thus boring you. It is a fault to which all lovers are prone. But as no misfortune has befallen Gerald, what is the important matter that brings you here?"

Herminie's words indicated such a feeling of perfect security that Olivier realised the difficulties of his task even more keenly, and it was with painful hesitation that he replied:

"As I said before, no misfortune has befallen Gerald; but I come to you at his request."

Herminie's face, which had grown quite serene, became anxious again, and she said:

"Pray have the kindness to explain, M. Olivier. You say you have come at Gerald's request? Why is an intermediary needed, even in the person of his most intimate friend? This astonishes me. Why did not Gerald come himself?"

"Because there is something he is afraid to confess to you, mademoiselle."

Herminie started violently; the expression of her face changed, and, looking searchingly at Olivier, she repeated:

"There is something Gerald is afraid to confess to me?"

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"It must be something terrible if he dares not tell me," exclaimed the girl, paling visibly.

"I meant to have used more precautions, and to have approached the subject in a more roundabout way, mademoiselle," replied Olivier, who was in torture, "but I see

that such a course on my part would only serve to prolong your anxiety — "

"My God! What am I about to hear?" murmured the young girl, trembling violently in every limb.

"Truth is better than falsehood, Mlle. Herminie."

"Falsehood?"

"In a word, Gerald can no longer endure the false position in which a peculiar combination of circumstances, and his desire to see you, have placed him. His courage has failed him. He has resolved that he will deceive you no longer, and, whatever may come of it, trusting to your generosity, he sends me, I repeat, to tell you what he is afraid to confess himself, — for he knows how bitterly you abhor deceit, and unfortunately Gerald has deceived you."

"Deceived me?"

"Yes, Gerald is not what he seems to be. You have known him under an assumed name. He has pretended to be what he is not."

"My God!" murmured the young girl, in abject terror.

A horrible suspicion had assailed her.

Never supposing for an instant that Olivier could have an aristocrat for an intimate friend, the poor child feared that Gerald had taken another name in order to conceal, not the obscurity of his birth or condition, — these were no disgrace in Herminie's eyes, — but guilty or dishonourable antecedents. In short, she imagined that Gerald must have committed some dishonourable act in the past.

So, in her wild terror, the girl, holding up her two hands as if to ward off an impending blow, exclaimed, brokenly:

"Do not finish this shameful confession, do not, I beseech you."

"Shameful!" repeated Olivier. "What! because Gerald has concealed the fact that he is the Duc de Senneterre — "

"You say that Gerald, your friend — "

"Is the Duc de Senneterre! Yes, mademoiselle. We were at college together; he enlisted, as I did. In that way I met him again, and since that time our intimacy has never flagged. And now, Mlle. Herminie, you can, perhaps, understand why Gerald concealed his real name and position from you. It was a wrong to which I became an accomplice through thoughtlessness; for what has since become a serious matter, that I deeply regret, was at first merely intended as a joke. Unfortunately, the introduction of Gerald as a notary's clerk to Madame Herbaut had already been made, when a singular chance brought you and my friend together. You will understand the rest. But I repeat that Gerald resolved, of his own free will, to confess the truth to you, as a continued deception was too revolting to his sense of honour."

On hearing that Gerald, instead of being a disgraced man, hiding under an assumed name, had really been guilty of no other wrong than that of concealing his noble birth, the revulsion of feeling Herminie underwent was so sudden and violent that she at first experienced a sort of vertigo; but when she became capable of reflection, when she became able to realise the consequences of this revelation, the young girl, who was as pale as death, trembled in every limb. Her knees tottered under her, and for a moment she was obliged to lean against the mantel for support.

When she did speak, it was in a strangely altered voice.

"M. Olivier," she said, "I am going to say something that may seem utterly senseless to you. A moment ago, before you had told me all, a terrible suspicion that Gerald had concealed his real name because he had been guilty of some wrong doing occurred to me — "

"What, you could believe that?"

"Yes, I did believe that, but I do not know but the

truth you have told me concerning Gerald's position causes me deeper sorrow than that I experienced when I thought Gerald might be a dishonoured man."

"Impossible, mademoiselle, impossible!"

"This seems to you as absurd as it does senseless, does it not?" asked the young girl, bitterly.

"It does indeed."

"But in that case, by the power of my love, I might hope to raise him from his slough of despond, to restore his self-respect, to rehabilitate him in my eyes, and in his own; but between me and M. le Duc de Senneterre there is now an unfathomable abyss."

"Oh, reassure yourself on that point," hastily exclaimed Olivier, hoping to cure the wound he had inflicted and to change his companion's grief to joy. "You really need have no fears on that score, Mlle. Herminie. I was deputised to inform you of Gerald's deception, but, thank Heaven! I am also authorised to tell you that he intends to atone for his fault and in the most satisfactory manner. Gerald may have deceived you in some matters, but he has never deceived you as to the sincerity of his sentiments. They are now what they have always been; his determination does not waver in the least. To-day, as yesterday, Gerald has only one desire, one hope, — that you will consent to bear his name, only to-day his name is that of the Duc de Senneterre. That is all."

"That is all!" exclaimed Herminie, whose deep despondency seemed to have given place to a sorrowful indignation. "That is all, you say, monsieur? So it is nothing to have won my affection under false pretences — to have reduced me to the trying necessity of renouncing a love which was the hope and blessing of my life or of entering a family that will regard me with aversion and disdain! And you call this nothing, monsieur! Ah, your friend pretends to love me, and yet respects me so little as to believe that I will ever submit to the count-

less humiliations such a marriage is sure to bring upon me!"

"But, Mlle. Herminie—"

"Listen to me, M. Olivier. If, after our first meeting, which, by reason of its very strangeness, made a deep impression upon me,—if, I say, after our first meeting, Gerald had frankly confessed that he was the Duc de Senneterre, I should have resisted my growing affection with all my strength, and I should have triumphed over it, perhaps; but, in any case, I would never willingly have seen Gerald again. I will not be his mistress, and, as I said before, I am not the woman to submit to the humiliations that await me if I consent to become his wife."

"You are very much mistaken, Mlle. Herminie. Accept Gerald's offer, and you will have no humiliations to fear. Gerald is his own master. Since he lost his father several years ago, he has had unbounded influence over his mother. He will make her understand what this love is to him. But if Madame de Senneterre seems disposed to sacrifice Gerald's happiness to financial greed, my friend is resolved, after all means of persuasion have been exhausted, of course, to dispense with his mother's consent, if need be."

"But I, monsieur, must have, cost what it may, not the affection,—for that does not come at will,—but the esteem of my husband's mother because I am worthy of her esteem. Never, do you understand me, never shall any one say that I was the cause of a rupture between Gerald and his mother, or that I took advantage of his love for me to force myself upon a noble and distinguished family; no, monsieur, no one shall ever say that of me, my pride will not permit it."

As she uttered these words Herminie was truly superb in her sadness and dignity.

Olivier had too keen a sense of honour himself not to share the young girl's scruples — the same scruples

which Gerald, too, had feared, for both the young men knew Herminie's indomitable pride.

Nevertheless, Olivier, resolved to make a last effort, said:

"But consider well, Mlle. Herminie, I entreat you. Gerald does all that any man of honour can do in offering you his hand. What more do you desire?"

"What I desire, monsieur, as I have told you, is to be treated with the consideration which is due me, and which I have a right to expect from M. de Senneterre's family."

"But Gerald can be responsible only for himself, mademoiselle. Any attempt to exact more would —"

"Say no more, M. Olivier," said Herminie, interrupting him; "you know me, and you know that I have a firm will."

"I do, mademoiselle."

"Very well. I will never willingly see Gerald again while I live, unless Madame de Senneterre, his mother, comes here —"

"Here?" exclaimed Olivier, in astonishment.

"Yes, unless Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre comes here and tells me that she consents to my marriage with her son. Then, no one can ever say that I forced myself upon this noble family."

This demand — which seemed and which was, in fact, merely the natural outcome of an intense but laudable pride — Herminie uttered simply and naturally, because, filled with a justly high respect for herself, the young girl felt that she asked only what was her just due.

But at the first thought, this demand seemed to Olivier so exorbitant that, in his astonishment, he could not help saying:

"Madame de Senneterre — come here — to tell you that she consents to your marriage with her son, — why, what are you thinking of, Mlle. Herminie? That exceeds the bounds of possibility!"

"And why, monsieur?" asked the young girl, with such ingenuous pride that Olivier, remembering how generous and noble Herminie's character and love were, replied, with no little embarrassment:

"You ask why Madame de Senneterre can not come here to tell you that she consents to your marriage with her son?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"But, mademoiselle, even ignoring the *convenances* of the fashionable world, the overtures you ask from a lady of Madame de Senneterre's age —"

But again interrupting Olivier, the girl said, with a bitter smile:

"If I belonged to the fashionable world of which you speak, monsieur, — if I had a mother and relatives, instead of being a poor orphan, — and M. de Senneterre desired my hand in marriage, would it not be according to the rules of propriety you spoke of just now that Madame de Senneterre should be the first to approach my mother or my relatives in her son's behalf?"

"Certainly, mademoiselle, but —"

"I have no mother, and I have no relatives," continued Herminie, sadly. "To whom, then, if not to me, should Madame de Senneterre address herself in relation to my marriage?"

"One word, mademoiselle, Madame de Senneterre might do this if she approved of the marriage."

"And that is precisely why I ask it, M. Olivier."

"But Gerald's mother does not even know you, mademoiselle."

"If Madame de Senneterre has such a poor opinion of her son as to believe him capable of choosing a wife unworthy of him, she can make all needful inquiries in relation to me. Thank God, I have nothing to fear."

"That is true," said Olivier, who had exhausted all his arguments.

"So this is my last word, M. Olivier," continued Herminie. "If Madame de Senneterre is not opposed to my marriage with her son, she will prove it by making the kindly overtures I ask; if she does not, she will consider me unworthy to enter her family, and in that case I will never see M. de Senneterre again."

"Oh, Mlle. Herminie, if only out of compassion for Gerald —"

"Believe me, I am much more in need of pity than M. de Senneterre," said the girl, and, no longer able to restrain her tears, she buried her face in her hands. "I may die of grief, I do not know, but to the last I will at least be worthy of Gerald and of his love."

Olivier was in despair, but he could not help admiring this noble pride, though he deeply deplored the consequences so far as Gerald was concerned.

Suddenly a loud ring of the door-bell resounded through the room. Herminie sprang up and hastily dried her tears; then, remembering Mlle. de Beaumesnil's note, she said to Olivier:

"It must be Ernestine. Poor child, I had forgotten all about her. M. Olivier, will you have the goodness to open the door for me?"

"One word more," said Olivier, in earnest, almost solemn tones; "you have no conception of the intensity of Gerald's love for you. You know I am not prone to exaggeration, yet I am afraid, do you hear me, positively afraid, when I think of the possible consequences of your refusal."

Herminie trembled at Olivier's ominous words. For a moment she seemed to be torn by conflicting doubts and fears; but she finally triumphed, though the poor girl, exhausted by this mental conflict, answered in tones that were barely audible:

"The thought of causing Gerald suffering is terrible to me, for I can judge of his love by my own. My own sorrow, too, enables me to judge what his must be.

Nevertheless, I will never sacrifice my dignity, for that is Gerald's as much as mine."

"I entreat you, mademoiselle, do not —"

"You have heard my resolve, M. Olivier. I shall not say another word. Have pity on me. Can you not see that this interview is killing me?"

Olivier, seeing that it was useless to expostulate further, bowed to Herminie in silence, and then walked towards the door; but he had scarcely opened it when he exclaimed:

"My uncle, and you, Mlle. Ernestine! Great Heavens! This pallor — and this blood on your forehead! What has happened?"

On hearing Olivier's words, Herminie rushed out of her room into the little hallway.

CHAPTER VII.

GOOD NEWS.

THE cause of Olivier's surprise and alarm was only too apparent.

Commander Bernard, pale as death and greatly agitated, was clinging to Mlle. de Beaumesnil's arm as if for support; while the young girl, quite as pale as the old officer, and clad in a simple lawn dress, had several blood-stains on her forehead and cheek.

"What is the matter, uncle?" cried Olivier, scrutinising the veteran's face with deep anxiety. "What has happened?"

"Great Heavens! Ernestine, are you hurt?" cried Herminie, almost simultaneously.

"It is nothing, Herminie," replied the young girl, trying to smile, though her voice trembled violently. "It is nothing, but excuse me for bringing this gentleman in. Just now — I — you see — "

But the poor child could say no more. Strength and courage were alike exhausted. Every vestige of colour fled from her lips; her eyes closed, her head fell back, her limbs gave way under her, and she would have fallen if Herminie had not caught her in her arms.

"She has fainted!" cried the duchess. "Help me carry her into my room, M. Olivier."

"And I — I am the cause of all this trouble," said the commander, following Olivier and Herminie with

tottering steps as they carried Ernestine into Herminie's room.

"Poor child," he murmured; "what a kind heart she has! What courage she displayed!"

The duchess, having placed Ernestine in the armchair, removed her hat and pushed back from the pure white brow her beautiful chestnut hair, which rolled down in heavy, shining waves upon her shoulders; then, while Olivier supported the girl's unconscious head, Herminie with a soft handkerchief staunched the blood which was flowing from a slight wound a little way above the temple.

The old sailor stood near, watching this touching scene, his lips trembling, and unable to utter a word, while big tears dropped slowly down from his eyes upon his white moustache.

"Support her, M. Olivier, while I go for some cold water and a little cologne," said Herminie.

She returned almost immediately with a handsome china basin, and a bottle of cologne, and, after sponging the wound lightly with a mixture of cologne and water, Herminie poured a little cologne in the palm of her hand and made Mlle. de Beaumesnil inhale it.

Gradually Ernestine's pale lips recovered their wonted colour and a slight flush succeeded the pallor in her cheeks.

"Heaven be praised! She is recovering consciousness," whispered Herminie, gathering up the orphan's long tresses and securing them with her shell comb.

Olivier, who had seemed deeply affected by the scene, now said to the duchess, who was standing beside the armchair, supporting Mlle. de Beaumesnil's head on her bosom:

"Mlle. Herminie, I regret very much that it should be under such unfortunate circumstances that I have the honour of introducing to you my uncle, Commander Bernard."

"'She has fainted.'"

Original etching by Arthur Morgan

The young girl responded with an almost affectionate smile and bow, and the old officer said:

"And I, mademoiselle, am doubly sorry, as I was unfortunately the cause of this accident which distresses you so much."

"But how did it happen, uncle?" asked Olivier.

So while Herminie, seeing that, thanks to her attentions, Ernestine was gradually regaining consciousness, made her again inhale a few drops of cologne, Commander Bernard began his explanation by saying:

"I went out this morning while you were talking with one of your friends, Olivier."

"Yes, uncle, Madame Barbançon told me that you had been so imprudent as to go out in spite of your extreme weakness, but she felt less anxious about you, I thought, from the fact that you had seemed in unusually good spirits when you left the house."

"Yes, yes, I was unusually gay because I was happy, oh, very happy, for this morning—"

But the commander, checking himself suddenly, gazed at Olivier with a peculiar expression, then added, with a sigh:

"No, no, I must not tell you now. Well, as I said before, I went out—"

"It was a very imprudent thing for you to do, uncle."

"Perhaps it was, but I had my reasons for wanting to go; besides, I thought a walk in the open air might do me good. Still, being a little doubtful of my strength, instead of going out on the plain as usual, I followed the broad grassy terrace that borders the railroad track in this direction. Feeling tired after I had walked a short distance, I sat down to rest and sun myself on the top of a bank on the side of one of those new streets which have been graded and paved, but on which no houses have yet been erected. I sat there a quarter of an hour, perhaps, then, thinking myself sufficiently rested, I decided that I would get up and start for home. But the walk,

short as it was, had exhausted my strength completely, for I had scarcely gotten upon my feet before I was seized with vertigo, my knees trembled under me, I lost my balance; the bank was steep — "

"And you fell?" asked Olivier, anxiously.

"I must have slidden rather than fallen to the foot of the bank, I think, and my situation would not have been at all dangerous, I suppose, if a big wagon, loaded with stones and drawn by horses which had been left to guide themselves by the driver who was walking on ahead, had not happened to come along just then."

"Great God!" exclaimed Olivier.

"How terrible!" cried Herminie.

"Ah, yes, especially to that dear young lady you see lying there wounded, yes, wounded by risking her own life to save mine!"

"What, uncle, this wound of Mlle. Ernestine's — ?"

"When I fell from the top of the bank," resumed the old man, interrupting his nephew, who had cast a look of inexpressible gratitude on Mlle. de Beaumesnil, "my head struck the pavement, and I lay there unable to make the slightest movement, though I seemed to see the horses advancing towards me through a sort of mist. My head could not have been more than a yard from the wheel when I heard a loud cry, and dimly perceived a woman, who was coming in the opposite direction from the horses, rush towards me. Then consciousness deserted me entirely. When I regained it," continued the old man, with increasing emotion, "I was half lying, half sitting, on the bank a couple of yards from the spot where I had fallen, and a young girl, an angel of goodness and courage, was kneeling beside me, with clasped hands, her face still pale with terror, and her forehead covered with blood. And it was she," exclaimed the old officer, turning to Ernestine, who had now entirely recovered her senses, "yes, it was you, mademoiselle, who saved my life at the risk of your

own, — you, a frail, delicate creature who listened only to the promptings of your noble heart and indomitable courage."

"Oh, Ernestine, how proud I am of being your friend!" cried the duchess, pressing the blushing and embarrassed girl to her heart.

"Yes, you may well be!" cried the old man, enthusiastically.

"Mademoiselle," said Olivier, in his turn, addressing Mlle. de Beaumesnil with unmistakable agitation, "I can only say — but I feel sure that you will understand what these words mean to me — I owe the life of my uncle, or rather of the most tenderly loved father, to you."

"M. Olivier," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil, averting her eyes after a wondering glance at the young man, "what you say makes me doubly happy, for until now I was entirely ignorant that this gentleman was that dear relative of yours Herminie was telling me about day before yesterday."

"But how are you feeling now, mademoiselle?" inquired the old man, with deep interest. "Don't you think it would be well to send for a physician, Mlle. Herminie? Olivier will run and get one."

"Pray do nothing of the kind, M. Olivier," cried Ernestine, hastily. "My head hurts me very little; the wound must be scarcely more than a scratch, for I hardly feel it. When I fainted just now, it was more from excitement than pain."

"That makes no difference, you must have a little rest, all the same," said Herminie. "I think, with you, that your wound is slight, but you have had such a fright that I intend to keep you a few hours."

"Oh, so far as that prescription is concerned, I will take it with pleasure, my dear Herminie," responded Mlle. de Beaumesnil, smiling; "and I shall try to make my convalescence last as long as possible."

"And now, Olivier, if you will give me your arm, we will leave these young ladies," said the veteran.

"M. Olivier, it will not do at all for Commander Bernard to return home on foot, weak as he is. You had better tell our portress to call a cab for you."

"No, no, my dear young lady, with Olivier's assistance I shall get along nicely. The fresh air will do me a world of good, and then I can show Olivier the place where I should have been killed but for this guardian angel here. I am not much of a devotee, mademoiselle, but I shall often make a sort of pilgrimage to that grassy slope to pray after my fashion for the noble-hearted girl who saved me at a time I was so anxious to live, for this very morning — "

And then, for the second time, to Olivier's great surprise, the veteran seemed to check words which were almost upon his lips.

"Oh, well, never mind," he continued, "I shall pray after my fashion for my guardian angel, for really," added the veteran, smilingly, "the world seems to be upside down, for now it is young girls who save old soldiers, — but fortunately the old soldiers have heart enough left for gratitude and devotion."

Olivier, with his eyes riveted on Mlle. de Beaumesnil's sad and gentle face, was experiencing a feeling of compassionate tenderness which was full of charm. His heart throbbed with conflicting emotions as he gazed at the young girl, and recalled the incidents of his first meeting with her, her ingenuous frankness and quaint originality, and, above all, Herminie's intimation that her friend's lot was far from being a happy one. Olivier had long been an ardent admirer of Herminie's rare beauty, but at this moment Ernestine seemed equally attractive in his eyes.

The young soldier was so absorbed that his uncle was obliged to take him by the arm and say to him:

"Come, my boy, we must no longer trespass on the

hospitality which Mlle. Herminie will surely pardon me for having accepted."

"The fact is, Herminie," said Ernestine, "knowing you lived only a short distance from the scene of the accident, I thought I might venture — "

"Surely you are not going to apologise for having acted as any friend would have done?" the duchess exclaimed, interrupting her.

"We will bid you adieu, young ladies," said the old naval officer, then, turning to Ernestine, he said earnestly:

"It would grieve me too much to think that I had seen you to-day for the first and last time. Oh, have no fears, mademoiselle," exclaimed the old man, noting a slight expression of embarrassment on the girl's tell-tale face, "my gratitude gives me no excuse for intruding myself upon you, but I should consider it a great favour if you and Mlle. Herminie would occasionally permit me to call and see you, — for it is not enough to have a heart full of gratitude, one should at least be allowed to sometimes give expression to it."

"M. Bernard," replied Herminie, "this desire on your part is too natural for Ernestine and me to feel any inclination to oppose it; and some evening when Ernestine will be at liberty, we will let you know, and you must do us the honour to come and take a cup of tea with us."

"May I really?" the veteran exclaimed, joyfully. Then he added:

"Yes, yes, the world does indeed seem to be upside down, for it is those who are already under heavy obligations who have benefits heaped upon them by their benefactors; but I am more than resigned, so adieu, my dear young ladies, or, rather, *au revoir*. Are you ready, Olivier?"

But as he reached the door he paused, and seemed to hesitate, then after a moment's reflection he came back, and said:

"I cannot do it, my dear young ladies; I cannot carry my secret away with me."

"A secret, M. Bernard?"

"Yes; I have been on the point of telling it twice, but both times I have checked myself, because I had promised to keep silence; but after all, it is only right that Mlle. Ernestine, to whom I owe my life, should at least know why I am so glad to live —"

"I, too, think you owe Ernestine this reward, M. Bernard," said Herminie.

"I assure you that I should be very happy to be honoured with your confidence, monsieur," added Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

"And it would be a real proof of confidence, mademoiselle, for, as I told you, I was advised to keep the matter a secret, and I must confess, my dear Olivier, that it was to keep it a secret from you that I went out this morning."

"But why, uncle? I do not understand."

"Why, because in spite of all the advice in the world, in my first transports of happiness over the good news which I had just heard, I couldn't have helped falling upon your neck and telling you all. So I went out, hoping to become sufficiently accustomed to my happiness to be able to conceal it from you afterwards."

"But, uncle, what good news do you refer to?" inquired Olivier, with increasing surprise.

"Your friend who was at the house this morning did not tell you that his first visit was to me, did he?"

"No, uncle, when he came out into the garden to find me, I supposed he had just arrived."

"Yes, for we had agreed to say nothing about our interview, as it was he who brought me the good news, and Heaven knows he was pleased enough about it, though everything else seemed to be going wrong with him. In short, young ladies, you will understand my

happiness, I think, when I tell you that my brave Olivier has been made an officer."

"I?" exclaimed Olivier, with rapturous delight, "I an officer?"

"Oh, what happiness for you, M. Olivier," cried Herminie.

"Yes, my brave boy," exclaimed the veteran, pressing Olivier's hands warmly, "yes, you are an officer; but I was to keep the secret from you until the day you will receive your commission, so your happiness would be complete, for you do not know all —"

"What more is there to tell, M. Bernard?" inquired Ernestine, who was watching the scene with lively interest.

"It is that my dear Olivier will not have to leave me again; at least not for a long time, for he has been appointed an officer in one of the regiments that have just come to garrison Paris. Ah, Mlle. Ernestine, have I not reason to love life now that Olivier and I are both so fortunate? Do you understand now the full extent of my gratitude to you?"

The newly made officer stood silent and thoughtful, but a strong emotion betrayed itself in his features as he glanced at Mlle. de Beaumesnil, with a new and very peculiar expression.

"Why, my boy," said the veteran, surprised and somewhat chagrined at the thoughtful silence which had followed Olivier's first exclamation of joy and astonishment, "how is this? I thought you would be so delighted to hear of your appointment. I know very well that it is only a tardily rendered acknowledgment of services rendered, still —"

"Pray do not think me ungrateful, uncle," replied Olivier, in a voice that trembled with emotion. "If I am silent, it is only because my heart is too full for utterance when I think of all the happiness this news implies; besides, I feel sure that I owe my appointment to the

enthusiastic efforts of my best friend — an appointment, too, that is unspeakably precious to me," added Olivier, casting still another look at Ernestine, who blushed, though she knew not why, as she met his earnest gaze, "because — because — it is you who announce it to me, my dear uncle."

But it was evident that Olivier had not disclosed the real reason that rendered his new appointment such a boon to him.

Ernestine alone seemed to read the young man's secret thoughts, for she blushed again and a tear glittered in her eye.

"And now, Mister Officer," resumed the veteran, gaily, "as these young ladies have heard our good news, we must no longer trespass upon their good nature. I trust, however, that Mlle. Herminie will not forget her promised invitation to take tea with her. You see I have a good memory, mademoiselle."

"You need have no fears on that score, M. Bernard. I shall prove to you that my memory is quite as good as yours," responded Herminie, graciously.

While the commander was addressing a few more words of gratitude and of farewell to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, Olivier, approaching Herminie, said to her in a low, beseeching tone:

"Mlle. Herminie, this is one of those days which should incline one to clemency. What shall I say to Gerald?"

"M. Olivier," replied Herminie, her face clouding suddenly, for the poor child had almost forgotten her own sorrows for the time being, "you know my resolve."

Olivier knew Herminie's remarkable firmness of character, so he smothered a sigh as he thought of Gerald's disappointment.

"One word more, Mlle. Herminie?" he asked. "Will you have the goodness to grant me another interview

to-morrow at any hour that suits you? It is upon a very important, but purely personal matter I wish to consult you this time, and you will be doing me a great favour if you grant my request."

"With pleasure, M. Olivier," replied the duchess, though she was not a little surprised at the request. "I shall expect you to-morrow morning."

"I thank you, mademoiselle. Good-bye until to-morrow, then," said Olivier.

He departed in company with Commander Bernard, and the two young girls — the two sisters — were left alone together.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STARTLING REVELATION.

OLIVIER'S parting words to Herminie had reawakened the grief and chagrin from which her mind had been temporarily diverted by Commander Bernard's unexpected arrival in company with Ernestine.

Ernestine, too, was silent and thoughtful for two reasons. One was the peculiar look Olivier had bestowed on her on hearing of his promotion, — a look whose tender and touching significance the young girl fancied she understood; the other was the melancholy pleasure she experienced at the recollection that this new but dearly prized friend was the young musician who had so greatly ameliorated Madame de Beaumesnil's sufferings towards the last.

Ernestine's silence was likewise prolonged by the difficulty she experienced in bringing the conversation around to the subject of her mother.

Her visit to Herminie had been easily managed. On going to church with Mlle. de la Rochaiguë as usual, she had asked Madame Laîné to accompany them, and on leaving church, by pretending that she had some shopping to do, she had succeeding in getting away alone with her governess, after which a cab had taken them to within a short distance of the Rue de Monceau, where Madame Laîné was now awaiting, in that vehicle, the return of her youthful employer.

Though the silence of the duchess had lasted only a

few moments, Ernestine, noticing the sad reverie into which her friend had fallen, said to her, with mingled tenderness and timidity:

"Herminie, I do not want to be intrusive, but it seems to me you are not in your usual good spirits this morning."

"That is true," answered the girl, frankly. "I am in great trouble."

"In great trouble, my dear Herminie?" asked Ernestine, quickly.

"Yes, and perhaps I will tell you all about it by and by, but just at this time I am too heart-broken to talk about it, so bear with me a little, until I can explain the cause of my grief, though I don't know that I ever can —"

"But why this reserve, Herminie. Don't you think me worthy of your confidence?"

"That is not the reason, my dear child, but you are so young that I ought not to talk to you about such matters, perhaps, but by and by we will see about it. Now, let us think about your comfort. You must lie down on my bed; you can rest better there than in a chair."

"But, my dearest Herminie —"

Without taking any notice of her guest's protest, Herminie stepped to the alcove and drew back the curtains, which her natural delicacy and reserve caused her to keep always closed, and Ernestine saw a little white iron bedstead covered with a pale pink counterpane, and surmounted by a canopy consisting of double draperies of the pretty chintz and fresh white muslin. The alcove, too, was hung with pale pink muslin, and the pillow-slip, dazzling in its whiteness, was edged with lace.

In fact, nothing could be daintier and prettier than this virginal couch, upon which Ernestine, at last yielding to the entreaties of the duchess, laid down to rest awhile.

Drawing the armchair up to the bedside and seating

herself in it, Herminie, taking the orphan's two hands affectionately in hers, said, with tender solicitude:

"I am sure a little rest will do you a world of good, Ernestine. How do you feel now?"

"My head aches a little, that is all."

"What a frightful risk you ran, my dear child."

"I don't deserve so much praise, though, Herminie; I did not think of the danger I was incurring for an instant. I saw the old gentleman fall almost under the wheels of the wagon, it seemed to me. I shrieked, and sprang to his assistance, and though I am not very strong, I succeeded, I scarcely know how, in dragging M. Bernard enough out of the way to prevent him from being crushed."

"You dear, brave child! But the wound on your head —"

"The wheel must have struck me, I suppose, for I became unconscious almost at that same instant, and M. Bernard, on recovering his senses, noticed that I was hurt. But don't let us talk any more about it. I was more frightened than hurt, and my reputation for bravery was very cheaply won."

Then casting an admiring glance around her, the young girl continued:

"You were right in saying that your room was charming, Herminie. How pretty and dainty everything is! And those lovely engravings and beautiful statuettes and graceful vases filled with flowers are all so simple and inexpensive that it seems as if any one might have them, and yet nobody has, because one must have taste to select them. And when I think," added the girl, enthusiastically, "that it was by your own labour that you acquired all these pretty things, I do not wonder that you are proud and happy. How much you must have enjoyed yourself here."

"Yes, I have had a great deal of pleasure out of my home, it is true."

"But now all these pretty surroundings have lost their charm? Why, that sounds very ungrateful in you."

"No, no, this little room is still unspeakably dear to me!" exclaimed Herminie, quickly, recollecting that it was in this room that she had seen Gerald for the first time, and for the last time, too, perhaps.

Ernestine had not been able to devise any way of leading the conversation to the subject of her mother without arousing Herminie's suspicions, but now, happening to glance at the piano, she added:

"And there is the instrument you play so divinely. How much pleasure it would give me to hear you."

"Don't ask me just now, I beg of you, Ernestine. I should burst into tears at the sound of the first note. When I am sad, music always makes me weep."

"I can understand that, but you will let me hear you play and sing some day, will you not?"

"Oh, yes, I promise you that."

"And, by the way, speaking of music," continued Ernestine, trying to control herself, "the other night when I was at Madame Herbaut's, I heard somebody say that a very sick lady once sent for you to play and sing for her."

"That is true," replied Herminie, sadly, "and this lady was the one I spoke to you about the other evening because she had a daughter whose name was the same as yours."

"And while she was listening to you the poor lady's sufferings became less poignant?"

"Because she forgot them, but alas! this alleviation of her sufferings could not save her."

"Kind-hearted as you are, Herminie, what loving attentions you must have lavished on the poor lady."

"Her situation was so interesting, so pitiable, you see, Ernestine. To die while still so young, and deploring the absence of a beloved daughter!"

"Did she ever speak of this daughter to you, Herminie?"

"Poor unhappy mother! Her child was the subject of her every thought. She had a portrait of her, painted when she was a mere child, and I have often seen her eyes fill with tears when they rested upon the picture. She often told me, too, how richly her daughter deserved her tenderness by the amiability and sweetness of her disposition. She spoke, too, of letters which her daughter wrote to her every day, letters in which her beloved child's nobility of heart showed itself in every line."

"This lady must have loved you very much to make you her confidante to such an extent, Herminie."

"She treated me with the greatest kindness, so it was only natural I should become deeply attached to her."

"And the daughter of this lady who was so fond of you, and whom you seem to have loved so much in return, — have you never felt any desire to make the acquaintance of this other Ernestine?"

"Yes, for everything her mother told me about her made me love her in advance, as it were, but at that time she was in a foreign land. When she returned to France, I did, for a time, have some hope of seeing and knowing her, but I was disappointed in that."

"How did that happen, my dear Herminie?" inquired Ernestine, concealing her curiosity, at least in part, however.

"Business took me to the house of her guardian, and while I was there something was said about my giving the young lady music lessons."

Ernestine gave a joyous start. This idea had never occurred to her before, but wishing to have something to justify her curiosity in Herminie's eyes, she exclaimed, laughingly:

"You must think it strange that I ask you so many questions about this young lady. Perhaps it is because

I feel that I should be dreadfully jealous if you should ever love her better than you do me."

"Oh, you need have no fears on that score," said Herminie, shaking her head, sadly.

"But why should you not love her?" asked Mlle. de Beaumesnil, eagerly; then regretting her involuntary display of anxiety, she added: "But I am not selfish enough to wish to deprive this young lady of your affection, of course."

"What I know of her, and the recollection of her mother's great kindness to me, will always make me fond of her. But alas! my dear Ernestine, it is a matter of pride with me to shun any friendship that does not seem entirely disinterested, and this young lady is very wealthy and I am poor."

"You must have a poor opinion of her, then, after all," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil, bitterly.

"Oh, no, Ernestine, after all her mother told me, I can not doubt her kindness of heart, but I am an entire stranger to her. Then, too, for many reasons, and more particularly from a fear of arousing sad recollections, I should not dare to speak of the circumstances which made me so intimately acquainted with her dying mother, nor of that mother's great kindness to me. Besides, would it not look very much as if I were trying to ingratiate myself with her, and presuming upon an affection to which I really have no claim?"

On hearing this admission, how earnestly Ernestine congratulated herself upon having won Herminie's affection before her new friend knew who she, Ernestine, really was! And what a strange coincidence! She had feared that, because she was the richess heiress in France, she would never be loved for herself alone; while Herminie, because she was poor, feared that her affection would not appear disinterested.

The duchess seemed to have become more and more depressed in spirits as the conversation proceeded. She

had hoped to find in it a refuge from her own sad thoughts, but such had not been the case, for it was this same laudable pride which made Herminie fear that her love for Gerald might be attributed to vanity or mercenary motives, and so had led to the resolve which would inevitably ruin her only hope of happiness.

For how could she expect that Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre would ever consent to make the advances required of her? But alas! though endowed with sufficient courage to sacrifice her love to the dignity of that love, Herminie realised none the less keenly what terrible suffering this courageous sacrifice would entail.

So referring almost unconsciously to the anguish she felt, after a moment's silence, she remarked, in a strangely altered voice:

"Ah, my poor Ernestine, how sad it is that the purest and noblest affections can be thus degraded by unworthy suspicions!"

And unable to restrain her feelings any longer, she burst into tears and hid her face upon the bosom of Ernestine, who, half rising and pressing her friend to her heart, exclaimed:

"What is it, Herminie? What is it? I saw that you were becoming more and more depressed, but dared not ask you the reason."

"Do not say any more about it," replied Herminie, ashamed of her tears. "Forgive this weakness in me, but just now a host of memories —"

"Herminie, I have no right to demand your confidence, I know, but sometimes it is a relief to talk of one's troubles —"

"Yes, yes, I know it. It is the constraint that is killing me, but oh, the humiliation, the disgrace!"

"Humiliation and disgrace attach to you? Oh, no, Herminie, you are too proud for that!"

"But is it not weak and humiliating to weep as I do,

after having had the courage to make a commendable and even necessary resolution?" she sobbed.

Then, after a moment's hesitation, the duchess continued:

"Do not regard what I am about to tell you as a confidential revelation on my part, my dear child, but rather as a useful lesson."

"A lesson?"

"Yes, for you, like myself, are an orphan; like me, you are alone in the world, and possessed of none of the experience that might save you from the snares and pitfalls by which poor girls like us are continually surrounded. So listen to me, Ernestine, and may you be spared the misery I am suffering now."

And Herminie described the scene in which, justly incensed against Gerald, who had ventured to pay her landlord the money she owed, she had treated him first with haughtiness and disdain, but afterwards forgiven him, touched by the generous impulse to which he had thoughtlessly yielded. After which, Herminie continued in words like these:

"Two days after this meeting, in the hope of diverting my mind from thoughts which had already gained too great an ascendency over me for my peace of mind, I went to Madame Herbaut's house. Judge of my surprise when I met this same young man again at that entertainment. My first feeling was one of chagrin, almost of fear, a presentiment, doubtless; then I had the weakness to yield to the charm of this second meeting. Never before had I seen a man who possessed, like him, manners at once unpretending, refined and distinguished, a brilliant, versatile mind, but never failing delicacy of feeling. I hate flattery, but his was characterised with so much grace and delicacy that I accepted it only too gladly, I fear. I learned that evening that his name was Gerald, and that—"

"Gerald?" Ernestine exclaimed, hastily, recollecting

that the Duc de Senneterre, one of the suitors for her hand, was also named Gerald.

Just then a loud ring of the door-bell attracted Herminie's attention and prevented her from noticing Mlle. de Beaumesnil's astonishment. The latter arose from the bed at the sound, while Herminie, greatly annoyed by this interruption, directed her steps towards the door.

An elderly serving man handed her a note containing these words:

"I have not seen you for several days, my dear child, not having felt as well as usual. Can you see me this morning? Most affectionately yours,

"MAILLEFORT.

"P. S. — Do not take the trouble to answer in writing. If you will see your old friend, simply say 'yes' to the bearer."

Herminie, in her grief, was inclined to find some excuse for deferring M. de Maillefort's visit, but remembering that the marquis, belonging to the aristocracy as he did, was doubtless acquainted with Gerald, and that she might obtain some more definite information concerning her lover without revealing her secret, she said to the servant:

"I shall expect to see M. le Marquis de Maillefort sometime during the day."

But as she returned to the room where Mlle. de Beaumesnil was awaiting her, Herminie said to herself:

"What if M. de Maillefort should come while Ernestine is here? Oh, well, it will not matter much, after all, if she does see him; besides, the dear child is so retiring that, as soon as a stranger comes, she is sure to leave me alone with him."

So Herminie continued her conversation with Mlle. de Beaumesnil without making any allusion to M. de Maillefort's approaching visit, for fear that Ernestine would leave sooner than she had intended.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

"FORGIVE me for having deserted you so unceremoniously, my dear Ernestine," Herminie remarked to her friend. "It was a letter, and I had to send a verbal reply."

"Do pray go on with your story, Herminie," replied Ernestine. "You have no idea how deeply interested I am."

"And it is such a relief to me to tell you my troubles."

"Yes, I was sure it would be," responded Ernestine, with ingenuous tenderness.

"I was just telling you that I learned at Madame Herbaut's little entertainment that this young man's name was Gerald Auvernay. It was M. Olivier who told me so, on introducing him to me."

"What! he knows M. Olivier?"

"They are intimate friends, for Gerald was a soldier in the same regiment as Olivier. On leaving the service, he entered the office of a notary, so he told me, but for some time past he had given up an employment which was so distasteful to him, and had found occupation on the fortifications under an officer of engineers he had known in Africa. So you see, Ernestine, that Gerald's position and mine were identical, and free as he seemed to be, I was surely excusable for allowing myself to yield to a fatal fondness for him."

"But why fatal, Herminie?"

"Wait and you shall know all. Two days after our meeting at Madame Herbaut's, on my return from my lessons, I went out into the garden to which my landlord had kindly given me the entrée. This garden, as you can see from the window, is separated from the street in the rear only by a hedge, and from the bench on which I had seated myself I saw Gerald pass. Instead of being handsomely dressed as on the evening before, he was clad in a gray blouse and a big straw hat. He gave a start of surprise on perceiving me, but far from seeming mortified at being seen in his working clothes, he bowed to me and, pausing, said gaily that he was just returning from his day's work, being engaged in superintending certain portions of the fortifications now in progress of construction at the end of the Rue de Monceau. 'An occupation which suits me much better than dull notary work,' he remarked. 'I am fairly well paid and I have a crowd of rather rough but very worthy men to superintend. I like it much better than copying stupid documents.'"

"I can understand that perfectly, my dear Herminie."

"It is more than likely that the cheerful way in which he accepted this arduous labour, manual labour, I might almost say, touched me all the more as Gerald had evidently received an excellent education. That evening when he left me he smilingly remarked that it was with the hope of sometimes meeting me within the boundaries of my park, as he often passed through that street on his way to visit a former comrade, who lived in a small house that could be seen from the garden. What will you think, Ernestine, when I tell you that almost every evening about sunset I had a chat with Gerald, and sometimes we even strolled out together to the same grassy knolls where M. Bernard met with his accident this morning? I found Gerald so full of frankness, generosity of heart, talent, and charming humour, he seemed

to have such a high — I was about to say such a just — opinion of me, that when the day came that Gerald declared his love, and told me that he could not live without me, I was so happy, Ernestine, oh, so happy! for if Gerald had not loved me I do not know what would have become of me. It would have been impossible for me to do without this love, and now to love alone, — to love without hope," added the poor girl, hardly able to restrain her tears, "oh, it is worse than death, for it means a life for ever desolate."

Controlling her emotion, Herminie continued:

"I told Gerald my feelings with the utmost frankness. On my side there was not only love, but almost gratitude, for without him life would have seemed intolerable to me. 'We are both free to choose,' I said to Gerald; 'our positions are equal. We shall both have to work every day for our daily bread, and that gratifies my pride, for idleness imposed upon a wife is a cruel humiliation to her. Our lot will be humble, even precarious, perhaps, Gerald,' I added, 'but with courage, and strong in our mutual love and trust, we can defy the worst misfortunes.'"

"What noble words, Herminie! How proud M. Gerald must have been of your love! But as you have every chance of happiness, why these tears and your evident despair?"

"Do you not think that I was more than justified in loving him?" asked the poor girl, trying hard to repress her sobs. "Was not mine a true and noble love. Oh, tell me, is it possible that any one can accuse me —"

But Herminie could not finish the sentence, for sobs choked her utterance.

"Accuse you? *Mon Dieu!* Accuse you of what? Are you not as free as M. Gerald? Does he not love you as much as you love him? Are your positions not equal?"

"No, no, our positions are not equal," replied Herminie, dejectedly.

"What is that you say?"

"No, our positions are not equal, alas! and that is my chief misfortune, for in order to equalise our positions apparently, Gerald deceived me as to his real station in life."

"Great Heavens! Who is he, then?"

"The Duc de Senneterre."

"The Duc de Senneterre!" exclaimed Ernestine, filled with terror for Herminie, as she remembered that Gerald was one of the three suitors for her — Ernestine's — hand, and that she was to meet him at the ball on the following Thursday. Consequently, he must have deceived Herminie in the most shameless manner, as he was, at that very time, endeavouring to marry a rich heiress.

Herminie attributed her friend's intense dismay and astonishment entirely to the startling revelation that had just been made, however, and asked:

"Tell me, Ernestine, am I not, indeed, unfortunate?"

"But such a deception on his part was infamous. How did you discover it?"

"M. de Senneterre himself, feeling unable to endure the life of deceit his first falsehood imposed upon him, but not daring to make the confession himself, entrusted the unpleasant task to M. Olivier."

"It should be some comfort to you that M. de Senneterre at least made this confession of his own accord," said Ernestine.

"Yes, and, in spite of the grief it has caused me, I see in it a proof of the loyalty I so admired in him."

"Loyalty!" exclaimed Ernestine, bitterly. "Loyalty, and yet he deserts you!"

"Deserts me? Far from it. On the contrary, he renews his offer of his hand."

"He, M. de Senneterre?" exclaimed Ernestine, in even greater astonishment. "But, in that case, why are you so unhappy, Herminie?" she added.

"Because a penniless orphan like myself can make such a marriage only at the cost of the bitterest humiliation."

Herminie could say no more, for just then the door-bell rang again.

"Forgive me, my dear Ernestine," she exclaimed, drying her tears. "I think I know who it is that has just rung. I am obliged to see this visitor and —"

"Then I will leave you, Herminie," said Ernestine, rising hastily. "I am sorry, though, to leave you in such grief."

"At least wait until my visitor comes in!"

"Go and open the door, then, Herminie, while I put on my hat."

The duchess started towards the door, then, recollecting M. de Maillefort's deformity, she returned, and said to her friend:

"My dear Ernestine, in order to spare the person I am expecting the slight annoyance which the expression of your face, when you first perceived his affliction, might cause him, I must warn you that this friend of mine is a hunchback."

On hearing this, Mlle. de Beaumesnil suddenly recollected that her governess had told her that the Marquis de Maillefort had asked for Herminie's address, and a vague fear led her to ask:

"Who is this friend?"

"A most estimable man who made my acquaintance by the merest chance, for he is one of the greatest of *grands seigneurs*. But I must not delay too long in opening the door. Excuse me for one moment, my dear Ernestine."

And Herminie disappeared, leaving Ernestine overwhelmed with consternation.

A grim presentiment whispered that M. de Maillefort was about to enter and find her in Herminie's home, and though Mlle. de Beaumesnil owed her resolve to learn

the truth, at any cost, to the Marquis de Maillefort's ironical remarks, and though her feelings towards him had undergone an entire change, she was not yet sure to what extent she could rely upon him, and the prospect of such a meeting was most unwelcome.

Ernestine's fears were realised.

Her friend returned, accompanied by the marquis. Fortunately, Herminie, noticing that the curtains of the alcove were open, hastened to close them according to her habit, so, as her back was turned towards Ernestine and M. de Maillefort for several seconds, she did not notice the evident shock that her two friends experienced at the sight of each other.

M. de Maillefort gave a sudden start of astonishment on recognising Mlle. de Beaumesnil. Intense curiosity, mingled with uneasiness, was apparent in every feature. He could not believe his eyes, and he was about to speak, when Ernestine, pale and trembling, clasped her hands with such a beseeching air that the words died upon his lips.

When Herminie turned, M. de Maillefort's face no longer expressed the slightest astonishment, and, doubtless, with the intention of giving Mlle. de Beaumesnil time to recover herself, he said to Herminie:

"I am intruding, I am sure, mademoiselle. My visit is inopportune, perhaps."

"Believe me, monsieur, no visit of yours will ever be inopportune here," responded the duchess, earnestly. "I only ask your permission to show my friend to the door."

"I beg you will do so," answered the marquis, bowing. "I should be miserable if you stood on the slightest ceremony with me."

Mlle. de Beaumesnil was obliged to exercise all her self-control to maintain even an appearance of calmness, but, fortunately, the little hall-way leading to Herminie's room was dark, so the sudden alteration in Ernestine's

features escaped the notice of her friend, as she said:

"Ernestine, after all I have just confided to you, I need not tell you how necessary your presence will be to me. Alas! I did not think I should so soon put your friendship to the test. In pity, Ernestine, do not leave me long alone! If you only knew how I shall suffer, for I cannot hope to see Gerald again, or, rather, the hope is so uncertain that I dare not even think of it, so I beseech you not to let any length of time pass without my seeing you."

"You may rest assured that I shall return as soon as I can, and that it will not be any fault of mine if —"

"Alas! I understand. Your time must be devoted to your work, because you are obliged to work in order to live. It is the same with me. In spite of my mental anguish, I shall have to begin my round of lessons one hour from now. My lessons, great Heavens! and I scarcely know what I am doing. But with people like us, we are not only obliged to suffer, but also to live."

Herminie uttered these last words with such despairing bitterness that Mlle. de Beaumesnil threw her arms around her friend's neck, and burst into tears.

"Come, come, I will not be so weak again, Ernestine," said Herminie, returning the embrace; "I promise you I will not. I will be content with whatever time you can give me. I will wait and think of you," added the duchess, forcing a smile. "Yes, to think of you, and to await your return, will be some consolation."

"Farewell, Herminie, farewell," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil. "I shall soon see you again, — just as soon as I possibly can, I promise you, — day after to-morrow, if possible. Yes, I will manage it somehow," added the orphan, resolutely, "day after to-morrow, at the same hour, you can count upon seeing me."

"Thank you, thank you!" exclaimed Herminie, embracing Ernestine effusively. "Ah, the compassion I

showed to you your generous heart returns in liberal measure."

"Day after to-morrow, then, it shall be, Herminie."

"Again I thank you with my whole heart."

"And now good-bye," said the orphan.

It was in a deeply agitated frame of mind that she wended her way back to the spot where her governess was waiting for her in the cab. As she left the house, she met a man who was walking slowly up the street, casting furtive glances at the house in which Herminie lived.

This man was Ravil, who, as we have said before, frequently hung about the home of the duchess, of whom he had retained a vivid and extremely tantalising recollection ever since the day he so insolently accosted her, when she was on her way to the Beaumesnil mansion.

De Ravil instantly recognised the richest heiress in France, who, in her agitation, did not even glance at this man, whom she had met but once, at the Luxembourg, where M. de la Rochaiguë had taken her.

"What does this mean?" Ravil said to himself, in the utmost astonishment. "Here is the little Beaumesnil dressed almost like a grisette, coming out alone, pale and evidently frightened half to death, from a house in this miserable part of the town. I'll follow her cautiously at a distance, and see where she goes. The more I think of it, the more inclined I am to believe that it is the devil himself who sends me such a piece of good luck as this! Yes, this discovery may be the goose that lays the golden eggs for me. It rejoices my heart. The mere thought of it awakens golden visions like those which haunt that big ninny, Mornand."

While Ravil was following the unsuspecting Ernestine, Herminie returned to M. de Maillefort.

CHAPTER X.

DESPAIR.

M. DE MAILLEFORT awaited Herminie's return in a state of deep perplexity, wondering in vain what strange combination of circumstances had brought these two young girls together. The marquis had desired this *rapprochement* greatly, as we shall soon discover, but the hunchback had not yet devised any way to bring it about, so Ernestine's presence in Herminie's home, the secrecy with which she must have gone there, the secrecy, too, which Mlle. de Beaumesnil, by an imploring gesture, had begged him to preserve, all combined to excite his curiosity as well as his anxiety to the highest pitch.

So, on the return of Herminie, who apologised for having absented herself so long, the marquis said, with the most careless air imaginable:

"I shall be very sorry if you do not always treat me with that perfect freedom permissible between devoted friends, my dear child, and nothing could be more natural, I am sure, than a desire to exchange a few parting words with one of your young acquaintances, for this young lady is, I suppose —"

"One of my friends, monsieur, or rather my dearest friend."

"Ah, indeed," answered the marquis, smiling. "It must be a friendship of long standing, then, I suppose?"

"Very recent, on the contrary, monsieur. In fact,

this friendship, though so true and tried, was conceived very suddenly."

"I have sufficient confidence in your powers of discernment and your nobility of heart to feel sure that you have chosen your friend wisely, my dear child."

"A single incident, which occurred scarcely an hour ago, monsieur, will give convincing proof of my friend's courage and nobility of soul. At the risk of her own life, — for she escaped serious injury only by a hair's breadth, — she rescued an aged man from certain death."

And Herminie, proud of her friend, and anxious to see her appreciated as she deserved to be, proceeded to describe Ernestine's courageous rescue of Commander Bernard.

The emotion of the marquis on hearing this unexpected revelation, which revealed Mlle. de Beaumesnil in a new and most attractive light, can be imagined.

"She certainly displayed wonderful courage and generosity of heart!" he cried. Then he added: "I was sure of it! You could not choose your friends other than judiciously, my dear child. But who is this brave young girl?"

"An orphan like myself, monsieur, who supports herself by her own exertions. She is an embroiderer."

"Ah, an embroiderer! But as she, too, is an orphan, she lives alone, I suppose?"

"No, monsieur, she lives with a relative, who took her, last Sunday evening, to a small entertainment, where I met her for the first time."

The marquis knit his brows. For an instant he was almost tempted to believe that one of the Rochaiguës was implicated in this mystery, but his implicit faith in Herminie caused him to reject that idea, though he wondered how Mlle. de Beaumesnil had managed to absent herself from her guardian's house for an entire evening, without the knowledge of the baron or his family. He asked

himself, too, with no less astonishment, how Ernestine had managed to secure several hours of entire freedom that very morning, but fearing he would arouse Herminie's suspicions by questioning her further, he remarked:

"It is pleasant for me to know that you have a friend so worthy of you, and it seems to me," added the hunchback, "that she could not have come more opportunely."

"And why, monsieur?"

"You know you have given me the privilege of being perfectly frank with you."

"Certainly, monsieur."

"Very well, then, it seems to me that you are not in your accustomed good spirits. You look pale, and it is very evident that you have been weeping, my poor child."

"I assure you, monsieur —"

"And all this is the more noticeable because you seemed so perfectly happy the last two or three times I saw you. Yes, contentment could be read on every feature; it even imparted to your beauty such a radiance and expansiveness that — as you may perhaps remember, from the rarity of the thing — I complimented you upon your radiant beauty. Think of it! I, who am the very poorest flatterer that ever lived!" added the hunchback, probably in the hope of bringing a smile to Herminie's lips.

But the girl, unable to conquer her sadness, replied:

"The change in my appearance which you speak of is probably due to the fright that Ernestine's narrow escape caused me, monsieur."

The marquis, sure now that Herminie was suffering from some grief that she wished to conceal, insisted no further, but said:

"It is as you say, doubtless, but the danger is over now, my dear child, so I may as well tell you that my visit this morning is important, very important. You

know that I have made it a point of honour not to say anything to you of late in relation to the grave matter that first brought me here."

"Yes, monsieur, and I am grateful to you for not having again referred to a subject that is so painful to me."

"I am compelled to speak again, if not of Madame de Beaumesnil, at least of her daughter," said the marquis, casting a keen, searching look at Herminie, in order to discover — though he was almost certain to the contrary — if the young girl knew that her new friend was Mlle. de Beaumesnil; but he did not feel the shadow of a doubt of Herminie's ignorance on the subject when she promptly replied, without the slightest embarrassment:

"You say you must speak of Madame de Beaumesnil's daughter, monsieur?"

"Yes, my dear child. I have made no attempt to conceal my devoted friendship for Madame de Beaumesnil, nor her dying requests in relation to the young orphan whom I have not yet discovered, in spite of the most persistent efforts. I told you, too, of the no less urgent request of the countess concerning her daughter, Ernestine. For divers reasons which, believe me, do not affect you in the least, I am very desirous, solely on Mlle. de Beaumesnil's account, understand, that you two young girls should become acquainted."

"But how could that be brought about, monsieur?" asked Herminie, eagerly, thinking what happiness it would give her to know her sister.

"In the easiest way imaginable — a way that was even suggested to you, I believe, when you so nobly returned that five hundred franc note to Madame de la Rochaiguë."

"Yes, monsieur, Madame de la Rochaiguë did give me some reason to hope that I might be employed to give Mlle. de Beaumesnil music lessons."

"Well, my dear child, that has been arranged."

"Really, monsieur?"

"Yes, I had a talk with the baroness last evening, and either to-day or to-morrow she is going to mention the matter to Mlle. de Beaumesnil. I do not doubt that she will accept the proposition. As for you, my dear child, I do not apprehend any refusal on your part."

"Far from it, monsieur."

"Besides, what I ask for this young girl, I ask in the name of the mother to whom you were so devotedly attached," said the marquis, with deep emotion.

"You can not doubt the interest I shall always feel in Mlle. de Beaumesnil, monsieur, but the relations between us will, of course, be confined to our lessons."

"Not by any means."

"But, monsieur!"

"You must understand, my dear child, that I should not have taken all this trouble to bring about an acquaintance between Mlle. de Beaumesnil and yourself, if it was to be confined to the lessons given and received."

"But, monsieur —"

"There are important interests at stake, interests which I feel can be safely intrusted to your hands."

"Explain, monsieur, I beg of you."

"I will do that after you have seen your new scholar," replied the marquis, thinking what a delightful surprise it would be to Herminie when she recognised Mlle. de Beaumesnil in the poor embroideress, her best friend.

"In any case, you may be sure that I shall consider it a sacred duty to fulfil your instructions, monsieur, and that I shall hold myself in readiness to go to Mlle. de Beaumesnil as soon as I am sent for."

"I will introduce you to her, myself."

"So much the better, monsieur."

"And if agreeable to you, next Saturday at this hour, I will come for you."

"I shall expect you monsieur, and I thank you very much for sparing me the embarrassment of presenting myself alone."

"And now a word of advice in Mlle. de Beaumesnil's interest, my dear child. No one knows, and no one must know that her poor mother summoned me to her in her last hours. My deep affection for the countess must also remain a secret. You will maintain a profound silence on the subject in case either M. or Madame de la Rochaiguë should ever speak of me."

"I shall comply with your wishes, monsieur."

"And I will come on Saturday, that is understood," said the hunchback, rising. "It will give me great pleasure to introduce you to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and I feel sure that you yourself will find a pleasure you do not anticipate in this meeting."

"I hope so, monsieur," replied Herminie, rather absently, for, seeing that the marquis was about to go, she did not know how to broach the subject that had been uppermost in her mind ever since the hunchback's arrival.

At last, endeavouring to appear perfectly calm, she said:

"Before you go, monsieur, will you have the goodness to give me a little information if it be in your power to do it?"

"Speak, my dear child," said M. de Maillefort, reseating himself.

"M. le marquis, in the social world to which you belong, have you ever chanced to meet Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre?"

"I was one of her deceased husband's most intimate friends, and I am extremely fond of the present Duc de Senneterre, one of the best, most whole-souled young men I know. I had fresh proofs of his nobility of character only yesterday," added the hunchback, with evident emotion.

A slight flush suffused Herminie's face on hearing Gerald thus praised by a man she esteemed as highly as M. de Maillefort.

That gentleman, evidently much surprised, continued:

"But what information do you desire in relation to

Madame de Senneterre, my dear child? Has any one proposed that you should give her daughters lessons?"

Hastily catching at these words which helped her out of a great difficulty by furnishing her with a pretext for her inquiries, Herminie, in spite of her natural abhorrence of anything like deception, replied:

"Yes, monsieur, some one told me that I might possibly secure pupils in that distinguished family, but before making any attempt in that direction, I was anxious to know if I could expect from Madame de Senneterre the consideration my rather too sensitive nature exacts. In short, monsieur, I am anxious to know whether Madame de Senneterre possesses a kindly nature or whether I am not likely to find in her that haughtiness which sometimes characterises persons of such an exalted position as hers."

"I understand you perfectly, and I am very glad you applied to me, for knowing you as I know you, dear, proud child that you are, I say very plainly, neither seek nor accept any pupils in that family. The Mlles. de Senneterre are lovely girls — they have their brother's disposition — but the duchess —!"

"Well, monsieur?" asked poor Herminie.

"Ah, my dear child, the duchess is more deeply in love with her title than any other woman I ever saw — which is very strange, as she is really extremely well born, while this ridiculous and absurd pride of rank is generally confined to *parvenus*. In short, my dear child, I would much rather see you brought in contact with twenty M. Bouffards than with this insufferably arrogant woman. The Bouffards are so coarse and ignorant that their rudeness amuses rather than wounds, but in the Duchesse de Senneterre you will find the most polite insolence, or rather the most insolent politeness, imaginable, so I am sure that you, my dear child, who have such a high respect for yourself, could not remain in Madame de Senneterre's company ten minutes without

being wounded to the quick, and resolving that you would never set foot in her house again. That being the case, what is the use of entering it?"

"I thank you, monsieur," replied Herminie, almost crushed by this revelation which destroyed her last hope, — a hope she had preserved in spite of herself, that perhaps Madame de Senneterre, touched by her son's love, would consent to make the concession that Herminie's pride demanded.

"No, no, my dear child," continued the marquis, "Gerald de Senneterre's filial tenderness must blind him completely for him not to lose all patience with his mother's absurd arrogance, and for him not to see that she is as hard-hearted as she is narrow-minded. In short, her selfishness is only exceeded by her cupidity. I have every reason to know this, so I am delighted to defraud her of a victim by enlightening you in regard to her. And now good-bye. Let me be of service to you in any matter, however small, as often as you can. It will serve to content me while waiting for something better. And now I will again bid you good-bye until Saturday."

"Until Saturday, monsieur."

And M. de Maillefort departed, leaving Herminie alone with her immeasurable despair.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BALL.

THE day of Madame de Mirecourt's ball had arrived.

The three suitors for Mlle. de Beaumesnil's hand were to press their claims at this brilliant fête.

The announcement that the richest heiress in France was to make her début that evening furnished a topic for general conversation, and made every one forget a suicide that had plunged one of the most illustrious houses in France into mourning.

Madame de Mirecourt did not attempt to conceal her intense gratification that her house had been selected for Mlle. de Beaumesnil's début, and secretly congratulated herself, too, at the thought that it would probably be in her house that the marriage of this famous heiress with the Duc de Senneterre would be virtually concluded, for being devoted to Gerald's mother, Madame de Mirecourt was one of the most ardent promoters of the scheme.

Having stationed herself as usual near the door of the main drawing-room to welcome her guests, Madame de Mirecourt awaited the coming of the Duchesse de Senneterre with the utmost impatience. That lady, who was to be accompanied by her son, had promised to come early, but had not yet arrived.

An unusually large number of guests, attracted thither by curiosity, had crowded into the principal salon in order to be the first to see Mlle. de Beaumesnil, whose name was upon every lip.

There was not a marriageable young man who had not bestowed an unusual amount of care upon his toilet, not that these young men had any openly avowed intentions, but — who knows? Heiresses are so peculiar, and who could foresee the consequences of a brief chat, of a quadrille, or of a first impression?

So each young man, as he cast a last complacent glance in his mirror, recalled all sorts of romantic episodes in which wealthy damsels had fallen in love at first sight with some stranger, whom they had finally married against the wishes of their relatives, — for all these worthy bachelors had but one thought in this instance, marriage, and they even carried their honesty so far as to love marriage for the sake of marriage itself, and the bride became little more than an accessory in their eyes.

Each bachelor had endeavoured to make the most of himself according to his character and appearance. The handsome ones had striven to make themselves still more handsome and irresistible.

Those of a less attractive or even homely exterior assumed a *spirituelle* or melancholy air.

In short, each and every one said to himself, like the people who allow themselves to be enticed into those lotteries that offer prizes of several millions:

"Of course it is absurd to suppose that I shall win one of these fabulous prizes. I have but one chance in nobody knows how many thousand, but somebody has got to win. Why may I not be the lucky one?"

As for the persons that composed the assemblage, they were very nearly the same who had attended the dance given by Madame de Senneterre several months before, and who had taken a more or less prominent part in the numerous conversations on the subject of Madame de Beaumesnil's approaching death.

Several of these persons also recollected the curiosity that had been expressed in regard to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, who was then in a foreign land, and whom no

one had ever seen, so a majority of Madame Mirecourt's guests would consequently witness to-night the solution of the problem propounded several weeks before.

Was the richest heiress in France as beautiful as a star or as hideous as a monster? Was she glowing with health or a hopeless consumptive?

It was ten o'clock, and Madame de Mirecourt was becoming very uneasy. Madame de Senneterre and her son had not made their appearance; Mlle. de Beaumesnil might arrive at any moment, and it had been arranged that Ernestine should be chaperoned by Madame de la Rochaiguë or Madame de Senneterre the entire evening, and that Gerald should dance the first quadrille with the heiress.

Every minute the crowd increased. Among the newcomers, M. de Mornand, accompanied by M. de Ravil, advanced in the most disinterested air imaginable to pay his respects to Madame de Mirecourt, who greeted him very graciously, and innocently remarked, without the slightest suspicion how true her words were:

"I am sure you came partially to see me, but chiefly to see the lioness of the evening, Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

The prospective minister smiled as he replied, with truly diplomatic guile:

"I assure you, madame, I came only to have the honour of paying my respects to you, and to witness one of those charming fêtes you alone know how to give."

After which M. de Mornand made his best bow and passed on, whispering to Ravil:

"Go and see if she is in one of the other rooms. I will remain here. Try to bring the baron to me if you see him."

De Ravil nodded an assent to his Pylades and mingled with the crowd, saying to himself, as he thought of the meeting of the day before, which he had carefully refrained from mentioning to M. de Mornand:

"So here is an heiress who wanders about lonely parts

of the town, grisette fashion, and then returns to that abominable Madame Laîné, who is complacently waiting for her in a cab. This last surprises me very little, however, as that unscrupulous female told me flatly, a week or so ago, that I could no longer count upon her influence. But at whose expense is she favouring this intrigue on the part of the little Beaumesnil? for there must be an intrigue, of course. That big ninny of a Mornand is no good. I might have known it. I must ferret out the truth of all this, for the more I think of it, the more convinced I am that the best thing for me to do is to drop Mornand, and devote my attention to the goose that lays the golden eggs, and, as a preliminary measure, I'll watch what goes on here this evening."

Just as the cynic vanished in the crowd, the Duchesse de Senneterre entered the room, but alone — her expression indicative of the deepest annoyance.

Madame de Mirecourt advanced a few steps to meet her, and, with the cleverness which women of the world possess in such an eminent degree, she found a way, though surrounded by a crowd of guests, and engaged to all appearance in exchanging the usual commonplaces with the duchess, to really hold the following low-toned conversation with her:

"But where is Gerald?"

"The doctor had to bleed him this evening."

"Good Heavens! what is the matter with him?"

"He has been in a terrible state ever since yesterday."

"But why did you not warn me, my dear duchess?"

"Because up to the very last minute he declared that he was coming, though he did feel so badly."

"It is too bad! Mlle. de Beaumesnil may come at any moment, and you were to have taken possession of her immediately upon her arrival."

"I know it, so I am in misery — nor is this all."

"Why, what else is troubling you, my dear duchess?"

"I cannot exactly explain why, but I have some doubts as to my son's intentions."

"What an idea!"

"He has acted so strangely of late."

"But did he not assure you this very day that, though he was far from well, he intended coming here this evening to meet Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Certainly; and another thing that reassures me is that M. de Maillefort — whom Madame de la Rochaiguë fears so much, and to whom my son has imprudently confided our plans — M. de Maillefort is on our side, for he knows the object of this meeting, and yet he promised to accompany Gerald and me."

"There is no help for it, I suppose, but it certainly is a fine opportunity lost. When Madame de la Rochaiguë arrives with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, do not leave them for an instant, and so arrange with the baroness that the girl shall have only unattractive men for partners."

"Yes, that is very important."

Every minute or two new guests came up to pay their respects to Madame de Mirecourt.

Suddenly Madame de Senneterre made a hasty movement, then, in a quick aside to her friend, exclaimed:

"Why, that is M. de Macreuse who has just come in! Can it be you receive that creature?"

"Why, my dear duchess, I have met him at your house a hundred times; besides, it was one of my most particular friends, the sister of the Bishop of Ratopolis, Madame de Cheverny, who requested an invitation for him. You know, too, that M. de Macreuse is received everywhere on account of his St. Polycarpe Mission."

"St. Polycarpe has nothing in the world to do with it. I assure you, my dear," said the duchess, interrupting her friend impatiently, "I received the man like everybody else, but I am sorry enough now, for I have discovered that he is nothing more or less than a scoundrel, a man that shouldn't be allowed in decent society.

I have even heard that valuable articles have been known to disappear during his visits," added Madame de Senneterre, unblushingly.

"Great Heavens! is it possible that the man's a thief?" exclaimed Madame de Mirecourt.

"No, my dear, of course not, he only borrows a diamond or some other jewel now and then, and forgets to return it."

At that very instant M. de Macreuse, who had been watching the expression of the ladies' faces as he slowly advanced, and who shrewdly suspected that they were none too charitably inclined towards him, but who nevertheless came forward to bow to the mistress of the house with imperturbable assurance, interrupted the conversation by saying:

"I hoped, madame, to have had the honour of presenting myself here this evening under Madame de Cheverny's auspices, but unfortunately for me she is feeling far from well, and made me the bearer of her profound regrets."

"I am truly inconsolable that indisposition deprives me of the pleasure of seeing Madame de Cheverny this evening," replied Madame de Mirecourt, dryly, still under the influence of what Madame de Senneterre had just said to her.

But Macreuse was not easily disconcerted, for bowing low to the duchess this time, he said, smilingly:

"I have less occasion to regret the kind protection of my friend, Madame de Cheverny, as I may almost venture to count upon yours, madame la duchesse."

"Justly, monsieur," responded Madame de Senneterre, with bitter hauteur, "I was just speaking to Madame de Mirecourt of you when you came in, and congratulating her upon having the honour of receiving you in her house."

"I expected no less from the habitual kindness of madame la duchesse, to whom I am indebted for many valuable acquaintances in the delightful circle in which

she moves," replied M. de Macreuse, in tones of the utmost respect.

After which he bowed low again, and passed on.

This protégé of Abbé Ledoux, Madame de Beaumesnil's former confessor, was much too shrewd and clear-sighted not to have felt that, in his late interview with Madame de Senneterre (the interview in which he had confessed that he was an aspirant for Mlle. de Beaumesnil's hand), he had, in vulgar parlance, put his foot in it, though the duchess had ostensibly promised him her support.

Too late Macreuse awoke to the fact that the duchess had a marriageable son, and the haughty and sarcastic greeting she had just given him confirmed this pious young man's suspicions; but he troubled himself very little about this hostility, feeling sure, from Mlle. Helena de la Rochaiguë's reports, that he was not only the first suitor in the field, but that he had already made a deep impression upon the young heiress by his touching melancholy and piety.

So, full of hope, M. de Macreuse first satisfied himself that Mlle. de Beaumesnil was not in the room, and then stationed himself in a convenient place to watch for her arrival, resolved to take advantage of the first opportune moment to invite her to dance.

"Did any one ever see anything to equal his impudence?" exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, as the abbé's protégé moved away.

"Really, my dear duchess, what you tell me astonishes me beyond measure. And to think that M. de Macreuse is regarded as a model of virtue and piety almost everywhere!"

"A fine model he is! There are plenty of other things I could tell you about him, too—"

But interrupting herself, Madame de Senneterre exclaimed:

"Here comes Mlle. de Beaumesnil at last. Ah, what a pity it is that Gerald is not here!"

"Oh, well, you can console yourself with the thought that Mlle. de Beaumesnil will hear nothing but your son's praises the entire evening. Remain here, and I will bring the dear child to you. You and the baroness must not leave her even for a moment."

And Madame de Mirecourt advanced to meet Mlle. de Beaumesnil, who had just come in, accompanied by M. and Madame de la Rochaiguë.

The young girl was leaning on her guardian's arm. A low buzzing sound, produced by loud whispers of "That is Mlle. de Beaumesnil," created a general stir in the spacious rooms, and a crowd of curious observers soon filled the doorways of the salon in which Ernestine found herself.

It was in the midst of this eager excitement that the richest heiress in France, lowering her eyes under the curious looks directed upon her from every side, made her entrance into society.

The poor child was secretly comparing this eagerness and impatience to see and to be seen by her, as well as the murmurs of admiration which she heard as she advanced, with the entirely different reception she had received at Madame Herbaut's house the Sunday before; and all this only made her the more resolved to carry her attempted test as far as possible, and thus satisfy herself once for all in regard to the honour and sincerity of the people with whom she seemed destined to live.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil, to the utter dismay of the Rochaiguës, and with a sudden display of obstinacy that both amazed and cowed them, had insisted upon dressing as simply as on the occasion of Madame Herbaut's little entertainment.

A plain white muslin gown and a blue sash, exactly like those she had worn the Sunday before, composed the attire of the heiress, who wished to look neither better nor worse than she did then.

The thought of attiring herself in a ridiculous manner

had occurred to her, almost certain that, even in that case, the charming originality of her toilet would be loudly praised on every side, but the thought of what a serious and important thing this test was to her led to a speedy abandonment of that idea.

As had been planned in advance by Mesdames de Mirecourt, de Senneterre, and de la Rochaiguë, Mlle. de Beaumesnil, as soon as she arrived at the ball, and made her way through the eager crowd that blocked her passage, was conducted by her hostess to the large and magnificent room which had been reserved for dancing. Here, Madame de Mirecourt left Ernestine in the care of Madame de la Rochaiguë and Madame de Senneterre, whom the baroness had just met — by the merest chance.

Not far from the divan on which the heiress was seated were several charming young girls, all as pretty and much more elegantly dressed than the belles of Madame Herbaut's ball, but every eye was riveted upon Ernestine.

"I shall not lack partners this evening," she thought, "nor shall I be asked out of pity. All those charming girls over there will doubtless be neglected on my account."

While Mlle. de Beaumesnil was absorbed in these observations, recollections, and comparisons, Madame de Senneterre was telling Madame de la Rochaiguë, in subdued tones, that, unfortunately, Gerald was so ill that it would be impossible for him to attend the ball, and it was therefore decided that Ernestine should be allowed to dance very little, and then only with carefully selected partners.

To attain this end, Madame de la Rochaiguë said to Ernestine:

"My darling child, you can judge of the sensation you are creating in spite of the unheard-of simplicity of your toilet. My predictions are more than realised, you see. You are sure to be overwhelmed with invitations to dance, but as it would never do for you to dance with

everybody, we will manage in this way. When I think it advisable for you to accept an invitation, I will open my fan; if, on the contrary, I keep it closed, you will decline on the plea that you are dancing very little, and that you have made too many engagements already."

Madame de la Rochaiguë had scarcely addressed this remark to Ernestine before quite a number of young people began to take their places for a quadrille. Several young men who were dying to invite Mlle. de Beaumesnil hesitated a little, rightly thinking that it was hardly the thing to ask her the minute she entered the ball-room; but M. de Macreuse, being either less scrupulous or more daring, did not hesitate a second, but, making his way swiftly through the crowd, begged Ernestine to do him the honour to dance the quadrille that was then forming, with him.

Madame de Senneterre, positively stupefied by what she called such unheard-of audacity on M. de Macreuse's part, turned to hastily implore Madame de la Rochaiguë to give the signal for a refusal, but it was too late.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil, anxious to find herself virtually alone with M. de Macreuse as soon as possible, promptly accepted the invitation, without waiting to note the movements of Madame de la Rochaiguë's fan, and, to that lady's great astonishment, immediately rose, accepted the pious young man's arm, and walked away.

"That scoundrel's insolence is really unbearable!" exclaimed the duchess, wrathfully.

But checking herself suddenly, she exclaimed in an entirely different tone:

"Why, there he is now!"

"Who?"

"Gerald."

"How fortunate! Where do you see him, my dear duchess?"

"Over there by the window. Poor boy, how pale he

looks!" added the duchess, feelingly. "How brave it was in him to come! We are saved!"

"Yes, it is, indeed, Gerald!" said Madame de la Rochaiguë, no less delighted than her friend. "M. de Maillefort is with him. The marquis did not deceive me, after all. He promised that he would do nothing to interfere with my plans as soon as he found out that M. de Senneterre was the husband I had picked out for Ernestine."

The music struck up, and just as Madame de Senneterre motioned to Gerald that there was a vacant seat beside her, the quadrille in which M. de Macreuse and Mlle. de Beaumesnil were to participate began.

CHAPTER XII.

M. DE MACREUSE OVERDOES THE MATTER.

MLLE. DE BEAUMESNIL had eagerly availed herself of the first opportunity for a conversation with M. de Macreuse, for from this conversation she hoped to ascertain whether her distrust of him was well founded. She was strongly inclined to think so, the abbé's protégé having assured Mlle. Helena that he had fallen suddenly and passionately in love with Mlle. de Beaumesnil at first sight.

And after her experience at Madame Herbaut's, the heiress knew what to think of the sudden and irresistible impressions her beauty must produce.

But recollecting the different things that had attracted her attention to M. de Macreuse, recalling the profound grief he had seemed to feel at his mother's death, the charity of which he had given such convincing proof by his alms, and, above all, the rare virtues which Mlle. Helena was continually lauding to the skies, Ernestine was anxious to know exactly what to think of this so-called model young man.

"M. de Macreuse has interested me very much," she said to herself. "He is very prepossessing in appearance, and his melancholy is extremely touching; in fact, but for M. de Maillefort's sneering remarks, which have made me distrust myself as well as others, I should perhaps have taken a decided fancy to M. de Macreuse. Perhaps, captivated by the rare virtues of which I have

heard so much, I should have unconsciously yielded to Mlle. Helena's influence, and perhaps have married M. de Macreuse, a choice which I am told would assure my happiness for life. Let me see, then, what kind of a choice I should have made, for I have an infallible means of distinguishing truth from falsehood now."

M. de Macreuse, full of confidence by reason of Helena's flattering reports, and realising the decisive nature of this interview, had long been preparing himself to play the liar to perfection.

When Ernestine laid her hand lightly on his arm, this pious youth pretended to give a sudden start, and the young girl was conscious of the sort of thrill that traversed her partner's arm.

When they had taken their places, M. de Macreuse made two ineffectual attempts to address a few words to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, but he seemed dominated by such a powerful, though perfectly natural emotion, that speech failed him and he could only blush deeply.

Abbé Ledoux, by the way, had taught his protégé an almost infallible means of blushing: this was to hang one's head for several seconds, holding one's breath all the while.

This skilfully counterfeited emotion occupied the first few minutes of the quadrille, M. de Macreuse having addressed scarcely a word to Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

Moreover, by a marvel of tact and cunning, the originator of the St. Polycarpe mission not only managed to escape the ridicule to which a profoundly melancholy man exposes himself when he undertakes to dance, but also to preserve an interesting appearance in Mlle. de Beaumesnil's eyes in spite of the terpsichorean evolutions he was obliged to perform.

He was aided not a little by his personal appearance, we must admit.

Dressed entirely in black, booted and gloved in the most irreproachable manner, the cut of his coat was

perfection, and his black satin cravat extremely becoming to one with his fair complexion and regular features. His figure, though a little too stout, was replete with an easy grace, and as he walked through the different figures of the quadrille, keeping perfect time to the music, he now and then cast a resigned but pathetic look at Mlle. de Beaumesnil, a look that seemed to say:

"I am a stranger to worldly pleasures — entirely out of place at fêtes, from which my sorrow impels me to hold myself aloof, but I submit to this painful contrast between my grief and the gaiety around me, because I have no other means of seeing you."

This beloved disciple of Abbé Ledoux, in short, belonged to that school of actors that seems to make a specialty of meaning but constrained glances, expressive but discreet sighs, all fittingly accompanied with rollings of the eyes, and a contrite, radiant, or ingenuous expression of countenance, as best suits the occasion.

In fact, M. de Macreuse's rendition of his rôle was so admirable that Mlle. de Beaumesnil, in spite of her suspicions, could not help saying to herself:

"Poor M. de Macreuse! it must be very painful for him to find himself at a gay entertainment in which he can take so little pleasure, overwhelmed as he is by the despair his mother's death has caused him."

But her suspicions reasserting themselves, "Then why did he come?" she asked herself. "Very possibly he was impelled to do so solely by avaricious motives. Is it a shameful hope of securing my wealth that makes him forget his grief and his regret?"

M. de Macreuse having at last found a favourable opportunity for beginning a conversation with Ernestine, summoned up another blush, then said, in his most timid, unctuous, and ingratiating tones:

"Really, I must appear very awkward and ridiculous to you, mademoiselle."

"And why, monsieur?"

"I have not dared to address so much as a word to you since the beginning of the dance, mademoiselle, but — embarrassment — fear — "

"What! I frighten you, monsieur?"

"Alas! yes, mademoiselle."

"That is not a very gallant remark, monsieur."

"I make no pretentions to gallantry, mademoiselle," replied Macreuse, sadly, but proudly. "I am only sincere — and the fear you inspire in me is real, only too real."

"But why do I inspire you with fear?"

"Because you have unsettled my life and my reason, mademoiselle, for from the first moment I saw you, without even knowing who you were, your image placed itself between me and the only previous objects of my adoration. Up to that time, I had lived only to pray to God and to cherish or mourn for my mother, while now — "

"Good Heavens, monsieur, how tiresome all this is! What I say may surprise you, but it is the truth, nevertheless; for you see," continued Mlle. de Beaumesnil, assuming from this on the imperious and flippant tone and manner of a spoiled child, "I am in the habit of saying anything that comes into my head, unless I am absolutely compelled to play the hypocrite."

It is needless to say that M. de Macreuse was astounded by this interruption, and above all by the manner in which it was made, for, from Mlle. Helena's reports, he had fully expected to find in Ernestine an artless, but deeply religious child; so, up to this time, he had carefully maintained a manner and a style of conversation which would be likely to please an unsophisticated devotee.

Still, too wary to betray his astonishment, and ready to change his character at a moment's notice if that should prove necessary to put him in tune with the heiress, this pious young man replied, venturing a half

smile — he had preserved a melancholy gravity up to that time:

"You are right, mademoiselle, to say whatever comes into your head, particularly as only charming thoughts can find shelter there."

"Really, monsieur, I like this kind of talk very much better. You were not at all amusing before."

"It depends upon you, mademoiselle," responded Macreuse, risking a whole smile this time, and so transforming his formerly grief-stricken face by degrees, as it were, "and it will always depend upon you, mademoiselle, to change sorrow to gladness. Nothing is impossible to you."

"Oh, as to that, there's a time for everything, I think. Now this morning at church I seemed sad, because church is so dull any way; besides, in order not to be outdone by Mlle. Helena I put on the most saintly airs imaginable, but in my secret heart I am awfully fond of gaiety and of amusing myself. By the way, what do you think of my gown?"

"It is in exquisite taste. In its charming simplicity it is a delightful contrast to the gaudy attire of all the other young ladies; but they are excusable, after all, and you deserve very little credit, for they have need of outward adornments, while you can dispense with them, mademoiselle. Perfection needs no ornamentation."

"That is exactly what I said to myself," responded Ernestine, with the most arrogant and conceited air imaginable. "I felt sure that, even in a plain white dress, I was pretty certain to eclipse all the other young girls and make them turn green with envy. It is such fun to excite envy in others and torment them."

"You must be accustomed to that pleasure, mademoiselle. It is true that the jealousy of others does afford one a vast amount of amusement, as you so wittily remarked a moment ago."

"Oh, I am not so wonderfully witty," responded

Ernestine, with an admirable semblance of overweening conceit; "but I am very fond of my own way and can't bear any one to oppose or contradict me. That is why I hate old people so. They are for ever preaching to young folks. Do you like old people, monsieur?"

"You mean mummies, mademoiselle. The chief aim of life should be pleasure."

And the imperious necessity of executing a figure in the quadrille having interrupted M. de Macreuse at this point, he took advantage of the excellent opportunity thus afforded to change the expression of his countenance entirely, and to assume the most joyous dare-devil air imaginable. A similar change, too, was apparent in his dancing. It was much more lively and animated. The young man straightened himself up, lifted his head high in the air, and whenever he found an opportunity he bestowed upon Mlle. de Beaumesnil glances which were now as impassioned as the former ones had been timid and discreet.

While he was assuming this new character, the abbé's protégé was all the while saying to himself:

"How strange! the girl is an arrant hypocrite evidently, inasmuch as she succeeded in deceiving Mlle. de la Rochaiguë so completely in regard to her real character. I strongly suspect, though, that my excellent friend was afraid that she would frighten me if she told me the truth about the girl. She little knows me. I'm glad that the girl is silly and vain, and that she thinks herself witty and beautiful and capable of outshining all the pretty women here to-night. Deceitfulness, ignorance, and vanity — it must be a fool indeed that can not use three such potent factors as these to advantage. But now to the main question! With a simpleton like this, reserve is unnecessary, nor can one pile on the flattery too thickly. Complaisance must extend almost to baseness, for the girl has evidently been utterly spoiled by her wealth. She knows perfectly well that anything

is permissible in her,— that any offence will be condoned in the richest heiress in France."

So as he returned to his place M. de Macreuse remarked to Ernestine:

"You accused me just now of being too grave, mademoiselle. You must not suppose that I am in the most hilarious spirits now, but the happiness of being with you intoxicates me."

"And why?"

"If Mlle. Helena, in encouraging me to hope that some day, when you learned to know me better, you might think me worthy to consecrate my life to you,—if Mlle. Helena was mistaken in this—"

"By the way, speaking of Mlle. Helena, you must admit that she is a frightful bore."

"That is true, but she is so good."

"So good! Well, that did not prevent her from saying something dreadful to me about you the other day."

"About me?"

"Yes, she made you out such a paragon of goodness that I said to myself: 'Great Heavens, how intolerable that man must be with all his virtues. A person as perfect as that must be a frightful nuisance! And then to be always at church or engaged in charitable works, the mere idea of it is enough to make one die of ennui. I did not say this to Mlle. Helena, but I thought it all the same. Judge then, monsieur, I, who would marry only to be as free as air and amuse myself from morning till night, to be always on the go, to be the most fashionable woman in Paris, and above all to be able to go to the masked ball at the Opera house! Oh, that ball, it sets me crazy just to think of it! Mercy! what is the use of being as rich as I am if one cannot enjoy everything and do exactly as one pleases?"

"When one is as rich as you are," replied M. de Macreuse, with unblushing effrontery, "one is queen everywhere, above all in one's own home. The man

you honour with your choice should, to follow out my comparison, be the prime minister of your kingdom of pleasure, — no, your chief courtier, and as such be ever submissive and eager to do your bidding. His one thought should be to save you from the slightest annoyance, and leave you only the flowers of existence. The birds of the air should not be freer than you; and if your husband understands his duty, your pleasures, your wishes, and even your slightest caprice, should be sacred to him. Is he not your slave, and you his divinity?"

"Good, monsieur, that would suit me perfectly, but from what Mlle. Helena has told me about you, and from what I myself have seen — "

"And what have you seen, mademoiselle?"

"I have seen you giving alms to the poor and even talking with them."

"Certainly, mademoiselle, and I — "

"In the first place, I have a horror of poor people, — they are so loathsome in their rags they fairly turn one's stomach."

"They are horrible creatures, it is true, but one has to throw them a little money now and then as one throws a bone to a starving dog to keep him from biting you. It is merely a matter of policy."

"I understand, then, for I wondered how you could feel any interest in such repulsive creatures."

"Good Heavens, mademoiselle," replied Macreuse, more and more earnestly, "you must not wonder at certain apparent contradictions between the present and the past. If any do exist you are the cause of them, so ought you not to pardon them? What did I tell you from the very first? Did I not confess that you had wrought a complete change in my life? Ah, yes, I had sorrows, but I have them no longer. I was devout, but henceforth there is only one divinity for me, yourself. As for my virtues," added M. de Macreuse, with a cynical smile, "they need not worry you. Only too happy

to lay the others at your feet, I will retain only such as may please you."

"How infamous!" thought Ernestine. "To attract my attention, or, rather, to excite my interest, this man made a pretence of being charitable, virtuous, devout, and a most devoted son; now he denies his virtues, his charity, his mother, and even his God, to please me, and attain his object, viz., to marry me for my money, while the detestable faults I affect do not shock him in the least; he even praises and exalts them."

Mlle. de Beaumesnil, who was little versed in dissimulation, and who had been obliged to exercise the greatest self-restraint in order to enact the rôle which would assist her in unmasking M. de Macreuse, could no longer conceal her scorn and disgust, and, in spite of all her efforts, her face betrayed her real feelings only too plainly, as she listened to M. de Macreuse's last words.

That gentleman, like all the disciples of his school, made a constant study of the countenance of the person he wished to deceive or convince; and the quick contraction of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's features, her smile of bitter disdain, and a sort of impatient indignation that she made little or no attempt to conceal at the moment, were a sudden and startling revelation to M. de Macreuse.

"I am caught," he said to himself. "It was a trap. She distrusted me and wanted to try me. She pretended to be silly, capricious, vain, heartless, and irreligious, merely to see if I would have the courage to censure her, and if my love would survive such a discovery. Who the devil would have suspected such cunning in a girl of sixteen? But if she has feigned all these objectionable proclivities, her real instincts must be good and generous," this beloved disciple of Abbé Ledoux said to himself. "And if she was anxious to put me to the test she must have had some idea of marrying me. All is not lost. I must recover my lost ground by a bold stroke."

M. DE MACREUSE OVERDOES THE MATTER.

These reflections on the part of the pious youth lasted only for an instant, but that instant sufficed to prepare him for another transformation.

The same brief interval had also given Mlle. de Beaumesnil time to calm her indignation, and summon up courage to end this interview by covering Macreuse with shame and confusion.

"So you are really willing to sacrifice all your virtues on my account?" exclaimed Ernestine. "Few persons are as obliging as all that. But the quadrille is ended. Instead of escorting me back to my seat, won't you take me to that conservatory I see at the other end of the room?"

"I am all the more pleased to comply with your request, mademoiselle, as I have a few words, very serious words they are, too, that I wish to say to you."

M. de Macreuse's tone had changed entirely. It was grave now, even stern.

Ernestine glanced at the pious young man in astonishment. His expression had become as sad as at the beginning of the quadrille, but the sadness was no longer of a melancholy, touching character, but stern, almost wrathful.

More and more amazed at this sudden metamorphosis which Macreuse intensified, so to speak, during their walk through the salon to the conservatory, Mlle. de Beaumesnil asked herself what could be the cause of this strange change in her companion.

The long gallery, enclosed in glass, which they entered, was bordered on each side with masses of flowering plants and palms, and at the farther end was an immense buffet loaded with the choicest viands. As nearly all the gentlemen were engaged in escorting their partners to their seats, there were very few people in the gallery at the time, so M. de Macreuse had an excellent opportunity to say all he had to say.

"May I ask, monsieur," asked the orphan, flippantly,

seeing that she must not yet abandon her rôle, — "may I ask what very important thing you have to say to me. Grave is about the same thing as being tiresome, it seems to me, and I have a horror of everything that is tiresome, you know."

"Grave or tiresome, you will, nevertheless, have to listen to these words, which are the last you will ever hear from my lips, mademoiselle."

"The last during this quadrille, evidently."

"They are the last words I shall ever say to you in my life, mademoiselle."

There was something so sad and yet so proud in the voice, face, and bearing of this model young man that Mlle. de Beaumesnil was overwhelmed with astonishment.

Nevertheless, she continued, still trying to smile:

"What, monsieur, I am never to see you again after all — all Mlle. Helena has said about — about — "

"Listen, mademoiselle," said M. de Macreuse, interrupting her; "it is impossible for me to keep up this farce any longer — or to express any longer sentiments that are and ever will be farthest from my thoughts."

"To what farce do you allude, monsieur?"

"I came here, mademoiselle, expecting to find in you the pious, sensible, generous, kind-hearted, honest young girl of whom Mlle. Helena has always spoken in terms of the highest praise. It was to such a girl that my first remarks were addressed, but the frivolous, sneering manner in which they were received disappointed and even shocked me."

"Can I believe my ears?" thought Ernestine. "What on earth does he mean?"

"Then a terrible doubt seized me," continued M. de Macreuse, with a heavy sigh. "I said to myself that perhaps you did not possess those rare virtues which I so greatly admire and which I was confident I should find in you, but I could not and would not believe it at first, preferring to attribute your words to the thoughtlessness of

youth. But alas! your frivolity, vanity, hardness of heart, and impiety became more and more apparent as our conversation proceeded. I wished to convince myself thoroughly, however, and though my heart bled each moment, I wanted to overcome your insensibility to all that is pitiable, your contempt for all that is sacred. I even went so far as to seem to scoff at that which is dearest to me in life, — my religion and the memory of my mother."

And a tear glistened on the lashes of the abbé's disciple.

"It was a test, then, in his case, as in mine," thought Ernestine.

"I feigned the most pernicious sentiments," continued M. de Macreuse, waxing more and more indignant, "and you did not utter a word of censure or even of surprise! At last I pushed flattery, cowardice, and baseness to their utmost limits, and you remained calm and approving instead of crushing me with the scorn I deserved. It has been a terrible ordeal for me, for the blow to my hopes is as unexpected as it is overwhelming. All is over now. Pardon a severity of language to which you are little accustomed, mademoiselle, but understand, once for all, that I will never devote my life to any woman, who is not worthy both of my love and my respect."

And with a stern and dignified air M. de Macreuse bowed low to Ernestine, and walked away, leaving her speechless with astonishment.

"I thank God that I was mistaken," thought the poor child, with a feeling of profound relief. "Such hypocrisy, deceit, and unscrupulousness are an impossibility. M. de Macreuse was horrified by the sentiments I expressed, consequently he must possess a sincere and upright soul."

The reflections of this artless girl, who was so ill fitted to cope with the wily founder of the St. Polycarpe mission, were interrupted by Mesdames de Rochaiguë and de Senneterre, who, having seen Mlle. de Beaumesnil enter

the gallery in company with M. de Macreuse, had hastened after her, thinking the young girl intended to partake of some refreshments, but the two ladies found her alone.

"Why, what are you doing here, my own dearest?" inquired Madame de la Rochaiguë."

"I came here for a little fresh air, madame; it is so warm in the ballroom."

"But the gallery is just as much too cool, my dear child, and you run a great risk of taking cold. You had better come back to the ballroom at once."

"As you please, madame," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

As she reëntered the ballroom, in company with the two ladies, she saw M. de Macreuse give her a despairing look; but he turned quickly away, as if he feared the young girl would perceive the sorrowful emotion to which he was a prey.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN HONEST CONFESSION IS GOOD FOR THE SOUL.

MLLE. DE BEAUMESNIL, on reëntering the ball-room, also noticed Gerald de Senneterre standing near one of the doorways. He was very pale, and looked extremely sad.

The sight of him reminded Ernestine of her friend's despair, and she asked herself why Gerald, in spite of his love for Herminie and his desire to marry her, had come to this ball where a meeting with her, Ernestine, had been arranged by Madame de la Rochaiguë.

As she conducted the richest heiress in France back to her seat, Madame de la Senneterre said to her, with the utmost affability:

"Mademoiselle, I am deputised to ask a favour of you in behalf of my son."

"What is it, madame?"

"He begs that you will give him the next quadrille, though he is not dancing this evening, for he has been, and is still, quite indisposed, so much so, in fact, that it required almost superhuman courage on his part to come at all. But he hoped to have the honour of meeting you here, mademoiselle, and such a hope as that works wonders."

"But if M. de Senneterre does not feel able to dance, madame, what is the use of my making an engagement with him?"

"That is a secret which I will divulge when the crowds of young men that are going to besiege you with invitations to dance are disposed of. Merely remember

that the next quadrille belongs to my son, that is, if you are so kind as to grant him the favour he asks."

"With the greatest pleasure, madame."

"Keep my seat for me, my dear," the duchess said to Madame de la Rochaiguë, rising as she spoke, "I must go and tell Gerald."

While awaiting M. de Senneterre's coming, Mlle. de Beaumesnil was also reflecting with all the satisfaction of a truly honest heart that M. de Macreuse had not deserved her distrust. The more she reflected on the subject, the more the young man's conduct pleased her by reason of its very rudeness. In fact, his austere frankness seemed to her almost as noble as the sentiment she fancied she had discerned in Olivier's breast, when he gave her such a peculiar but meaning look on so unexpectedly hearing that he had been made an officer.

"They are both noble men," she said to herself.

But Mlle. de Beaumesnil was not allowed to enjoy these pleasant and consoling thoughts long, for she had scarcely seated herself before she was besieged with invitations to dance, as Madame de Senneterre had predicted. Resolved to observe and judge for herself, as much as possible, the heiress accepted quite a number of these invitations, among them one from M. de Mornand.

Eager to discover M. de Senneterre's intentions, and to ascertain why he had engaged her for a quadrille if he did not feel able to dance, Ernestine awaited the time for Gerald's approach with no little interest and curiosity. At last she saw him leave his place, after exchanging a few words with M. de Maillefort, whom Ernestine had not seen since she met him so unexpectedly at Herminie's home.

On seeing the hunchback, the orphan could not help blushing, but, as she cast another glance at him, she was touched by the expression of tender solicitude with which he was regarding her, and the meaning smile he

bestowed upon her reassured her completely in regard to that gentleman's discretion.

The time for forming the quadrille having arrived, Gerald approached Mlle. de Beaumesnil and said:

"I have come to thank you for the promise you so kindly made to my mother."

"And I am ready to fulfil it, monsieur, as soon as I know —"

"Why I engaged you for this quadrille when I am not able to dance?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"It is an innovation, mademoiselle, that would prove very popular, I am sure, if it were adopted," said Gerald, smiling in spite of his melancholy.

"And this innovation, monsieur?"

"For many persons, and I confess that I am one of the number, a quadrille is merely a pretext for a quarter of an hour's tête-à-tête. Then why not say in so many words: 'Madame, or mademoiselle, will you do me the honour to talk with me for the next quarter of an hour?' and as one can talk much more comfortably sitting on a sofa than standing, why, let us sit through this dance and talk."

"I think the idea a very happy one, monsieur."

"And you consent?"

"Certainly," replied Ernestine, moving a little closer to Madame de la Rochaiguë, and thus making room for Gerald beside her.

The dancers having taken their places on the floor, most of the seats were vacant; and Gerald, having no neighbour on the other side, could talk to Ernestine without any danger of being overheard, especially as Madame de la Rochaiguë, in order to give her ward greater freedom, moved a little farther from Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and a little nearer to Madame de Senneterre.

Up to this time, M. de Senneterre had been talking in a light, half jesting tone, but as soon as he found himself

virtually alone with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, his manner changed entirely, and his features and accents alike indicated the deepest interest and anxiety.

"Mademoiselle," he said earnestly, almost solemnly, "though I am far from well, I came here this evening to do my duty as an honourable man."

Mlle. de Beaumesnil experienced a feeling of intense relief. Gerald had no intention of deceiving Herminie, then, and doubtless he was about to explain why he had not relinquished all pretensions to her — Ernestine's — hand.

"Do you know how an heiress is married off, mademoiselle?" asked Gerald.

And as Mlle. de Beaumesnil gazed at him in surprise, without making any reply, Gerald continued:

"I will tell you, mademoiselle, and this knowledge may serve to protect you from many dangers. A certain mother, my mother, for example, — one of the best women in the world, — hears that the richest heiress in France is in the matrimonial market. My mother, dazzled by the advantages that such a union would afford me, does not trouble herself in the least about the character or personal appearance of this heiress. She has never even seen her, for the rich orphan is still in a foreign land. But that makes no difference; this enormous fortune must be secured for me if possible, it matters not by what means. My mother, yielding to an aberration of maternal love, hastens to the wife of this orphan's guardian, and it is decided that, on the arrival of the heiress, an inexperienced child of sixteen, weak and defenceless, and ignorant of the ways of the world, she shall be so surrounded and influenced that her choice is almost certain to fall upon me. This shameful bargain is concluded; the way in which I am to first make her acquaintance, apparently by chance, is decided upon, even to the more or less becoming costume I am to wear on that occasion! Everything

has been arranged, though I hear and know nothing about it. The heiress, too, who is still a hundred leagues from Paris, knows no more about it than I do. At last she arrives. Then, for the first time, my mother informs me of her plans, sure that I will accept with joy the piece of good fortune offered me. Nevertheless, I decline it at first, saying that I have no taste for married life, and that I should be certain to prove a bad husband. 'What difference does that make?' says my mother. 'Marry her, in spite of that — she is rich.' And yet my mother is as honourable and as widely honoured as any woman. But you do not know the baneful, yes, fatal, influence of money!"

"Can you hear what they are saying, my dear?" the duchess whispered to Madame de la Rochaiguë as this conversation was going on.

"No," replied that lady, likewise in a whisper, "but the child seems to be listening with a great deal of interest. I just stole a glance at her when she was not looking, and her face was positively radiant."

"I was sure of Gerald. He can be irresistible when he chooses!" exclaimed the delighted duchess. "The girl is ours. And to think I was simpleton enough to fly into a passion just because that miserable Macreuse asked her to dance!"

"As I remarked a few minutes ago, I acted the part of an honourable man and refused to think of this marriage at first," Gerald continued; "but unfortunately my mother's entreaties, my fear of grieving her, and last, though not least, my indignation on hearing of the nefarious schemes of an unscrupulous rival, and possibly my own unconscious longing for such colossal wealth, induced me to reconsider, and I finally decided to try to marry the heiress, even at the risk of making her the most wretched of women, for a mercenary marriage is sure to end disastrously."

"Well, monsieur, have you kept this resolution?"

"A subsequent conversation with two dear friends of mine, high-minded, noble-hearted men, opened my eyes. I saw that I was pursuing a course unworthy of me and of those who loved me. It was decided, however, that, out of consideration for my mother's wishes, I should meet the heiress, and if, after seeing her and knowing her, I loved her as much as I would have loved a penniless and nameless young girl, I would do my best to win her."

"Well, monsieur, have you seen this heiress?"

"Yes, mademoiselle; but when I saw her it was too late."

"Too late?"

"A love as sudden as it was honourable and sincere for a person who was worthy of it no longer permitted me to appreciate, as she, I am sure, deserves, the young lady my mother wished me to marry."

On hearing this honest but delicately worded confession, Mlle. de Beaumesnil could not repress a joyous movement. Gerald loved Herminie as she deserved to be loved, and he had just given fresh proof of his nobility of character by the generosity of his conduct towards Ernestine.

The orphan's joyous start had not escaped the watchful eyes of Madame de la Rochaiguë, and that lady said, in a low tone, to the duchess:

"All is well! Look at Mlle. de Beaumesnil! See what a brilliant colour she has, and how her eyes sparkle!"

"Yes," said the duchess, leaning slightly forward to peep at Ernestine, "the poor little thing looks almost pretty, as she listens to Gerald."

"One of the greatest triumphs of love is its transfiguration of its object, my dear duchess," answered Madame de la Rochaiguë, smiling, "and I am sure your son will not be blind to this triumph."

"M. de Senneterre," said Ernestine, "I thank you

most sincerely for your frankness and your wise counsels, of which I, perhaps, stand in greater need than you think; but though I am too glad of your presence here to be astonished at it, I should like to know —"

"Why I am here this evening, mademoiselle, in spite of my resolution? It is because I wished to avail myself of this opportunity — the only one I shall have, perhaps — to talk to you alone, and perhaps put you on your guard against schemes similar to those to which I so narrowly escaped becoming an accomplice, for not many men, I fear, will be as scrupulous. Your guardian and his wife will lend themselves to any scheme that will serve their interests. They care nothing about your future happiness and welfare. All this is hard, mademoiselle, very hard, and it would be cruel, indeed, in me to arouse this fear and distrust in your heart, if I could not, at the same time, offer you, as a guide and protector, a noble-hearted man who is as much feared by the base and unscrupulous as he is loved by men of worth. Have confidence, perfect confidence, in this man, mademoiselle, though strenuous efforts have been, and will be, made to prejudice you against him."

"You refer to M. de Maillefort, do you not?"

"Yes, mademoiselle. Believe me, you will never find a more faithful and devoted friend. If doubts assail you, turn to him. He is a wonderfully shrewd and discerning man. Guided by him, you are sure to escape the snares and pitfalls that surround you."

"I shall not forget this advice, M. de Senneterre. A strong liking for M. de Maillefort has succeeded the animosity I formerly felt for him, an animosity due entirely to the shameful slanders repeated to me in regard to him."

"Our quadrille is nearly over, mademoiselle," said Gerald, forcing a smile. "I have profited by the only opportunity at my disposal. To-morrow, much as it

pains me to disappoint my mother, she must know the truth."

Ernestine's heart sank at the thought that Gerald would, doubtless, also confess his love for Herminie on the morrow. How terribly angry Madame de Senneterre would be to hear that her son preferred a penniless and nameless orphan to the richest heiress in France! And though she had no suspicion of the condition Herminie had attached to her marriage with Gerald, Mlle. de Beaumesnil realised what well-nigh insuperable difficulties must stand in the way of such a marriage, so she sadly replied:

"You may be sure, M. de Senneterre, that, in return for the generous interest you have manifested in me, you shall have my most fervent wishes for your own happiness, and that of the woman you love. Farewell, M. de Senneterre, I hope to be able to prove some day how grateful I am for the generosity of your conduct towards me."

The quadrille having ended, several young ladies returned to their seats near Mlle. de Beaumesnil; so Gerald rose, bowed to the orphan, and, feeling both ill and fatigued, immediately left the ball-room.

Madame de Senneterre, delighted by the favourable indications which she, as well as Madame de la Rochaiguë, had observed, whispered to the baroness:

"Try to find out what effect Gerald has produced."

So Madame de la Rochaiguë, leaning towards Mlle. de Beaumesnil, said to her:

"Ah, my dear child, is he not charming?"

"No one could be more agreeable or evince more noble and refined feelings."

"Then, my dear child, you are the Duchesse de Senneterre. At least, it depends solely upon yourself. Come, say yes, here and now!"

"You embarrass me very much, madame," responded Ernestine, casting down her eyes.

"Oh, yes, I understand," replied Madame de la Rochaiguë, thinking that maidenly reserve alone prevented Ernestine from confessing that she wished to marry Gerald.

"Well, my dear, he has quite turned her head, has he not?" asked Madame de Senneterre, nudging the baroness slightly with her elbow.

"Completely, completely, my dear duchess. But give me your arm, and let us go and find M. de Senneterre, to tell him of his success."

"The dear child is ours at last, and Gerald will be the largest landowner in France. As for our little private compact, my dear baroness," added Madame de Senneterre, in even more subdued tones, "I scarcely need assure you that it shall be carried out with scrupulous exactitude. I have said nothing to my son about it, understand, but I will vouch for him."

"We will not talk of that now, my dear duchess; but as Madame de Mirecourt has been so exceedingly kind, don't you think it would be in excellent taste for him — "

"Oh, that is understood, of course," said Madame de Senneterre, hastily interrupting the baroness. "Nothing could be more just, I am sure. But let us make haste and find Gerald. Do you see him anywhere?"

"No, my dear duchess, but he is in the gallery, doubtless. Come, let us look for him there."

Then turning to Ernestine, Madame de la Rochaiguë said:

"We shall leave you only for a moment, my dear child. We are merely going to make some one as happy as a king."

And without waiting for any reply from Ernestine, Madame de la Rochaiguë gave her arm to the duchess, and the two ladies hastened towards the gallery.

M. de Maillefort, who seemed to have noted the departure of the two ladies, now approached Ernestine, and, availing himself of one of the privileges accorded a man of his years, took the seat beside the young girl which Madame de la Rochaiguë had just vacated.

CHAPTER XIV.

VILLAINY UNMASKED.

As M. de Maillefort seated himself beside Ernestine, he remarked, with a smile:

"So you are no longer afraid of me, I see."

"Ah, monsieur," replied the girl, "I am so thankful for this opportunity to thank you—"

"For my discretion? That will stand any test, I assure you. I give you my word that no one knows or ever will know that I met you at the home of the very best and noblest young woman I know."

"Is she not, monsieur? But if I know Herminie, monsieur, it is to you that I am indebted for the honour."

"To me?"

"You remember, perhaps, that one evening in Mlle. Helena's presence you said some very hard, but alas! only too true things about me."

"Yes, my poor child. I knew how much you disliked me. I could never find an opportunity to see you alone, and, though I was watching over you, it was necessary, imperatively necessary, that your eyes should be opened, and that you should understand the object of the fulsome flattery of which you might eventually become the dupe."

"Ah, well, monsieur, your words did open my eyes, and I saw very plainly that those around me were deceiving me, and that I was already on the verge of becoming a victim to their shameful flattery. I made a resolve then and there, and, in order to discover the

truth concerning myself, I arranged with my governess to attend a little dancing party given by one of her friends, where I was to be introduced as a poor orphan relative of hers."

"And at this party you met Herminie. She told me so. I understand everything now. So you wished to know your own intrinsic worth without your fortune, eh?"

"Yes, monsieur, and the test was a very painful though profitable one. It has taught me among other things to appreciate the value and the sincerity of the attentions showered upon me this evening," she added, meaningly.

And as the hunchback, hardly able to repress his emotion, gazed at Ernestine in silence, deeply touched by the strength of character this young and defenceless girl had displayed, she asked, timidly:

"Can you blame me, monsieur?"

"Blame you, my poor child, no, no. The only blame attaches to the unscrupulous persons whose baseness almost compelled you to take such a step — a step I not only approve but admire, for you yourself do not realise how much courage and nobility of character you evinced."

A rather elderly man, approaching the divan upon which M. de Maillefort was seated, leaned over the back of it, and said to the hunchback, in a low tone:

"My dear marquis, Morainville and Hauterive are at your service. They are standing by the window opposite you."

"Very well, my dear friend. A thousand thanks for your kindness and theirs! You have informed them of the condition of affairs, have you not?"

"Fully."

"And they make no objection?"

"How could they in a case like this?"

"Then all is well," responded the marquis.

Then turning to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, he asked:

"For which quadrille did M. de Mornand engage you?"

"For the next, monsieur," replied Ernestine, much surprised at the question.

"You hear, my friend," said M. de Maillefort to the gentleman who had just spoken to him.

"Very well, my dear marquis."

And M. de Maillefort's friend, after having made quite a détour, rejoined Messrs. Morainville and d'Hauterive, and said a few words to which both gave a nod of assent.

"My dear child," remarked the marquis, again turning to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, "I have been watching over you for some time past without appearing to do so, for though you never saw me at your mother's house during your childhood, I was one of your mother's friends — most devoted friends."

"Ah, monsieur, I ought to have mistrusted that sooner, for you have been so grossly maligned to me."

"That was very natural under the circumstances. Now, a word or two upon a more important matter. M. de la Rochaiguë has often spoken of M. de Mornand as a suitor for your hand, has he not? and has also assured you that you could not make a better choice?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"My poor child!" said the marquis, compassionately; then he continued, in his usual sarcastic tone:

"And Mlle. Helena, in her turn, saintly, devout creature that she is, has said the very same thing about M. Célestin de Macreuse, another extremely devout and saintly personage."

But the orphan, noting the bitter and cynical smile that played about the lips of the marquis as he spoke of the saintliness of the abbé's disciple, ventured to say:

"You have a poor opinion of M. de Macreuse, perhaps, marquis?"

"Perhaps? No, my opinion on that subject is very decided."

"I admit that I, too, distrusted M. de Macreuse," began Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

"So much the better," interrupted the marquis, hastily. "The wretch caused me far more anxiety than any of the others. I was so afraid that you would be duped by his pretended melancholy and his hypocrisy, but fortunately such persons not unfrequently excite the instinctive distrust of the honest and ingenuous."

"But you need feel no such apprehensions, I assure you," resumed Ernestine, triumphantly. "I must undeceive you on that point."

"Undeceive me?"

"In regard to M. de Macreuse? Yes."

"And why, pray?"

"Because there are no real grounds for any distrust. M. de Macreuse is a sincere and honourable man, plain-spoken almost to rudeness, in fact."

"My child, you frighten me," exclaimed M. de Maillefort, in such accents of alarm that Mlle. de Beaumesnil was thunderstruck. "Do not conceal anything from me, I beseech you," continued the hunchback. "You can have no conception of the diabolical cunning of a man like that. I have seen such hypocrites deceive the shrewdest people, — and you, my poor innocent child!"

Mlle. de Beaumesnil, impressed by M. de Maillefort's evident anxiety, and having perfect confidence in him now, proceeded to give him the gist of her recent conversation with the pious young man.

"He mistrusted your motive, my child," said the hunchback, after a moment's reflection, "and, seeing that he had been caught in a trap, audaciously resolved to turn the tables on you by pretending that he had been putting you to a similar test. I tell you that such men positively appall me."

"Good Heavens! is it possible, monsieur?" exclaimed the terrified girl. "Oh, no, he cannot be so utterly base! Besides, I am sure you would think very differently if you had seen him. Why, the tears positively came to his eyes when he spoke of the bitter grief the loss of his mother had caused him."

"The loss of his mother!" repeated the marquis. "Ah, you little know —"

Then suddenly checking himself, he added:

"There he is now! Ah, it was certainly Heaven that sent him here just at this moment. Listen and judge for yourself, my poor dear child. Ah, your innocent heart little suspects the depths of degradation to which avarice reduces such souls as his."

Then elevating his voice loud enough to make himself distinctly heard by those around him, he called out to Macreuse, who was just then crossing the ballroom in order to steal another glance at Mlle. de Beaumesnil:

"M. de Macreuse, one word, if you please."

The abbé's protégé hesitated a moment before responding to the summons, for he both hated and feared the marquis, but seeing every turned eye upon him, and encouraged by the success of his late ruse with Ernestine, he straightened himself up, and approaching M. de Maillefort, said coldly:

"You did me the honour to call me, M. le marquis."

"Yes, I did you that honour, monsieur," replied the marquis, sardonically, and without taking the trouble to rise from his seat; "and yet you are not at all polite to me, nor to the other persons who happen to have the pleasure of your company."

On hearing these words, quite a number of persons gathered around the two men, for the satirical and aggressive spirit of the marquis was well known.

"I do not understand you, M. le marquis," replied M. de Macreuse, much annoyed, and evidently fearing

some disagreeable explanation. "So far as I know I have not been lacking in respect towards you or any other person present."

"I hear that you have had the misfortune to lose your mother, monsieur," said the marquis, in his rather shrill, penetrating voice.

"Monsieur," stammered M. de Macreuse, apparently stupefied by these words.

"Would it be indiscreet in me to ask when you lost madame, your mother — if you know."

"Monsieur!" faltered this model young man, blushing scarlet. "Such a question — "

"Is very natural, it seems to me, besides being rendered almost necessary by the lack of respect of which I complain, not only in my own name, but in the name of all your acquaintances."

"Lack of respect?"

"Certainly. Why did you not politely inform your acquaintances of the sad loss which you have had the misfortune to sustain, etc?"

"I do not know what you mean, M. le marquis," replied Macreuse, who had now recovered his composure, in a measure.

"Nonsense! I, who am a great church-goer, as every one knows, heard you ask a priest at St. Thomas d'Aquin the other day to say a certain number of masses for the repose of your mother's soul."

"But, monsieur — "

"But, monsieur, there can be no doubt of the truth of my statement, as you were quite overcome with grief and despair, apparently, while praying for this beloved parent in the Chapel of the Virgin, — so completely overcome, in fact, that your good friends, the beadles, were obliged to carry you in a dead swoon to the sacristy, — a piece of shameful deception on your part that would have amused if it had not revolted me."

Staggered for a moment by this unexpected attack,

the abbé's protégé had now recovered all his native impudence.

"Every one will understand why I could not and should not answer such an extraordinary — such a truly distressing question. The secret of one's prayers is sacred —"

"That is true!" cried several voices, indignantly. "Such an attack is outrageous!"

"Did any one ever hear the like of it?"

As we have remarked before, M. de Macreuse, like all persons of his stamp, had his partisans, and these partisans very naturally had a strong antipathy for M. de Maillefort, who hunted down everything false and cowardly in the most pitiless fashion, so a still louder murmur of disapproval was heard, and such expressions as: "What a distressing scene!" "Did you ever hear anything as scandalous!" and "How brutal!" were distinctly audible. But the marquis, no whit disconcerted, allowed the storm to spend itself, until Macreuse, emboldened by his opponent's silence said, boldly:

"The interest so many highly esteemed persons manifest in me makes it unnecessary for me to prolong this interview, and —"

But the marquis, interrupting him, said, in accents of withering contempt:

"M. de Macreuse, you have lied atrociously. You have not lost your mother, M. de Macreuse; your sainted mother is living, as you know very well, and your sainted father also. You see that I am sufficiently well informed concerning your antecedents. You have played an infamous part! You have cast odium upon a sentiment that even the most degraded respect, — the sentiment of filial love. The object of all this duplicity is known to me, and if I refrain from disclosing it, you may be sure that it is only because names are involved which are so honoured that they should not even be mentioned in the same breath with yours — if you possess one."

"'*Enough, monsieur, enough.*'"

Original etching by Adrian Marcel.

M. de Macreuse's frightful pallor and utter consternation proved the truth of these charges so conclusively that even the warmest admirers of this model young man dared not rally to his defence, while those who had always felt an instinctive dislike for the founder of the St. Polycarpe Mission, loudly applauded the marquis.

"Monsieur," cried Macreuse, terrible to behold in his suppressed rage, — for he felt that his villainy was certain to be unmasked now, — "for such an insult as this —"

"Enough, monsieur, enough. Leave this house at once. The mere sight of you is offensive to respectable people, and Madame de Mirecourt will be infinitely obliged to me for punishing you as you deserve. It is absolutely necessary that scoundrels like you should be made an example of now and then, and, distasteful as the rôle of executioner is to me, I have assumed it to-night, and my task is not yet ended by any means."

This announcement increased the confusion and excitement very considerably.

The model young man, anticipating another attack, and thinking he had had quite enough of it, straightened himself up, as a snake straightens itself up from beneath the foot that is crushing it, and said, insolently:

"After these gross insults, I will not remain another minute in this house, but I venture to hope that, in spite of the difference in our ages, M. le Marquis de Maillefort will be so kind as to accede to-morrow to a request which I shall make through two of my friends."

"Go, monsieur, go! The night brings counsel, and after a little reflection you will abandon your absurd and sanguinary pretensions."

"So be it, monsieur, but in that case you may rest assured that I shall resort to other means," retorted the model youth, casting a venomous look at the hunchback, as he turned to depart.

Madame de Mirecourt, recollecting what Madame de Senneterre had said in relation to M. de Macreuse, was

" 'Enough, monsieur, enough.' "

Original etching by Adrian Marcel.

not sorry to see that gentleman's villainy exposed, but to put an end to the excitement and confusion this strange scene had created, she requested several men she knew very well to form a quadrille as soon as possible.

In fact, the young men were already starting out in search of partners.

This exposure of M. de Macreuse filled Mlle. de Beaumesnil's heart with gratitude and also with terror when she thought that she might have yielded to the interest M. de Macreuse had at first inspired, and perhaps married a man capable of such an infamous act — an act that revealed an utterly depraved nature.

While engaged in these reflections, the orphan saw that Madame de Senneterre and Madame de la Rochaiguë, who had been for a time unable to force their way through the crowd that had gathered around the two men, had returned and resumed their seats beside her. The marquis then rose and stepped around back of the divan, after which he leaned over Madame de la Rochaiguë and said, almost in a whisper:

"Ah, well, madame, you see I am not a bad auxiliary, after all. I discover many strange and villainous things from my post of observation, as I told you some time ago."

"I am utterly astounded, my dear marquis," replied the baroness. "I understand everything now, however. This explains why my odious sister-in-law has been dragging the poor dear child off to the Church of St. Thomas d'Aquin every morning. With her apparent stupidity and her religious zeal, Helena is a most perfidious creature. Did any one ever hear of such deceitfulness and treachery?"

"The end is not yet, my dear baroness. You have not only been sheltering a viper in your house, but a veritable serpent as well."

"A serpent?"

"Yes, an enormous one, with long teeth," said the

marquis, with a meaning glance at M. de la Rochaiguë, who happened to be standing in the doorway, showing his teeth after his usual fashion.

"What! my husband?" exclaimed the baroness. "What do you mean?"

"You will soon know. Do you see that stout man advancing towards us with such a triumphant air?"

"Of course. That is M. de Mornand."

"He is coming to ask your ward to dance."

"Oh, that doesn't matter. We can let her dance with anybody now, for we were right in our suppositions. The dear child is charmed with M. de Senneterre, my dear marquis."

"I am sure of it."

"So behold the Duchesse de Senneterre," said Madame de la Rochaiguë, triumphantly, "and that without the slightest trouble."

"The Duchesse de Senneterre!" repeated the hunchback. "Not quite."

"Of course not, but the matter is virtually settled."

"So at last you are satisfied with Gerald, Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and me, are you not, my dear baroness?"

"Delighted, my dear marquis."

"That is all I want to know. Now I can devote my attention to that stout man and your serpent of a husband, whose coils —"

"What! M. de la Rochaiguë has dared —"

"Ah, my poor baroness, your ingenuousness rends my heart. Look, listen and profit thereby, poor credulous woman that you are!"

As the marquis uttered these words, M. de Mornand was already bowing low before Mlle. de Beaumesnil to remind her of the engagement she had made to dance with him.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PROSPECTIVE MINISTER'S DEFEAT.

"MADEMOISELLE has not forgotten that she promised me this dance, I trust," said M. de Mornand, complacently. "Will she do me the honour to accept my arm?"

"That cannot be, M. de Mornand," interposed M. de Maillefort, who was still leaning over the back of the sofa on which Ernestine was seated.

M. de Mornand straightened himself up hastily, and, perceiving the marquis, demanded with great hauteur:

"What can not be, monsieur?"

"You can not dance with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, monsieur," answered the hunchback, still in the same quiet tone.

M. de Mornand shrugged his shoulders disdainfully, then, turning to Ernestine, repeated:

"Will mademoiselle do me the honour to accept my arm?"

Embarrassed and bewildered, Ernestine turned to M. de Maillefort as if to ask his advice, and again the marquis repeated in the same quiet but impressive tone, emphasising each word strongly:

"Mlle. de Beaumesnil can not and must not dance with M. de Mornand."

Ernestine was so impressed by M. de Maillefort's grave, almost solemn manner that, turning to M. de Mornand, she said, casting down her eyes:

"I must beg you to excuse me, monsieur, for I feel too fatigued to keep the promise I made you."

M. de Mornand bowed low before Ernestine without uttering a word, but as he straightened himself up he cast a meaning glance at the hunchback.

That gentleman answered it by pointing to one of the doors of the gallery towards which he, too, directed his steps, leaving Mlle. de Beaumesnil in a state of great mental perturbation.

This little scene had passed unnoticed, the few words interchanged between the marquis and M. de Mornand having been uttered in subdued tones and in the midst of the confusion that always accompanies the forming of a quadrille, so no one but Madame de la Rochaiguë and the Duchesse de Senneterre had the slightest suspicion of what had occurred.

M. de Mornand on his way to the gallery was accosted successively by M. de la Rochaiguë and M. de Ravil, who had watched with mingled wonder and uneasiness their protégé's futile efforts to induce the heiress to keep her engagement.

"What! you are not going to dance?" inquired De Ravil.

"What has happened, my dear M. de Mornand?" asked the baron, in his turn. "I thought I saw you talking with that accursed hunchback, whose insolence and audacity really exceed all bounds."

"You are right, monsieur," replied the prospective minister, his face darkening. "M. de Maillefort seems to think he can do anything he pleases. Such insolence as his must be put a stop to. He actually had the impertinence to forbid your ward's dancing with me."

"And she obeyed him?" exclaimed the baron.

"What else could the poor girl do after such an injunction?"

"Why this is abominable, outrageous, inconceivable!" exclaimed the baron. "I will go to my ward at once, and —"

"That is useless now," said M. de Mornand. Then, turning to Ravil, he added:

"Come with me. I must have an explanation with M. de Maillefort. He is waiting for me in the gallery."

"I, too, will accompany you," added the baron.

As the three gentlemen approached the hunchback, they saw Messrs. de Morainville and d'Hauterive standing beside him, as well as five or six other men who had been assembled at the request of the marquis.

"M. de Maillefort, I have a few words of explanation to ask of you," said M. de Mornand, in coldly polite tones.

"I am at your service, monsieur."

"Then, if agreeable to you, you and I will go to the picture-gallery. Ask one of your friends to accompany you."

"I am not disposed to comply with your request, monsieur, for I intend to have our explanation as public as possible."

"Monsieur?"

"I do not see why you should fear publicity if I do not."

"So be it, then," responded M. de Mornand, "so I ask you here before these gentleman, why, when I had the honour to invite a certain young lady to dance a few minutes ago, you took the liberty of saying to that young lady, 'Mlle. de Beaumesnil can not and must not dance with M. de Mornand.' Those were your very words."

"Those were my very words, monsieur. You have an excellent memory. I hope it will not play you false, presently."

"And I wish to say to M. de Maillefort," interposed the baron, "that he arrogates to himself an authority, a right, and a surveillance which belong to me exclusively, for in telling my ward that —"

"My dear baron," said the marquis, smilingly, interrupting M. de la Rochaiguë, "you are a model, paragon,

and example for all guardians, past, present and future, as I will prove to you later, but permit me now to reply to M. de Mornand, whom I have just had the honour to congratulate upon his excellent memory, and to ask him if he recollects something I said to him at a certain *matinée dansante* given by the Duchesse de Senneterre, — something in relation to a slight scratch that was intended to fix in his memory a date which I might have occasion to remind him of at some future day."

"That is true, monsieur," said M. de Mornand, "but that affair has not the slightest connection with the explanation I just demanded of you."

"On the contrary, monsieur, this explanation is the natural consequence of that affair."

"Be more explicit, if you please, monsieur."

"I will. At that entertainment at the house of Madame de Senneterre, in the garden, under a clump of lilacs, in the presence of several gentlemen, and notably M. de Morainville and M. d'Hauterive here, you had the audacity to calumniate Madame la Comtesse de Beaumesnil in the most shameless manner."

"Monsieur!"

"Without either compassion or consideration for an unfortunate lady who was then lying at the point of death," continued the hunchback, interrupting M. de Mornand, indignantly, "you insulted her in the most cowardly manner and even went so far as to say that no honourable man would ever marry the daughter of such a mother as Madame de Beaumesnil."

And at a hasty movement on the part of M. de Mornand, who was white with rage, the marquis, turning to Messrs. de Morainville and d'Hauterive, asked:

"Is it not true that M. de Mornand made that remark in your presence, gentlemen?"

"M. de Mornand did make that remark in our presence," they replied. "It is impossible for us to deny the fact."

"And I, myself, unseen by you, heard you make it, monsieur," continued the hunchback, "and, carried away with just indignation, I could not help exclaiming, 'Scoundrel!'"

"So it was you!" cried Mornand, furious to see all his hopes of future wealth thus rudely blighted.

"Yes, it was I, and that is why I just told Mlle. de Beaumesnil that she could not and should not dance with you, monsieur, — a man who had publicly defamed her mother; and I leave it to these gentlemen here if I have not done perfectly right to interfere in this matter."

A silence that was anything but complimentary to M. de Mornand followed the words of the hunchback.

De Ravil alone ventured to speak. It was in an ironical tone.

"M. le marquis must be trying to pose as a paladin or knight-errant to inflict a wound upon a gallant gentleman, as a sort of memento, merely to prevent him from dancing a quadrille with M. de Beaumesnil some day."

"Or rather to prevent M. de Mornand from marrying Mlle. de Beaumesnil, monsieur," corrected the marquis, "for your friend is as mercenary as Mlle. de Beaumesnil is rich, which is saying a good deal, and in the conversation I overheard at Madame de Senneterre's dance, M. de Mornand betrayed his intentions even at that early day. By defaming Madame de Beaumesnil's character, and making the disgraceful effects of his calumnies extend to the daughter, and even to any man who might wish to marry her, M. de Mornand hoped to drive away all rivals. This infamous conduct exasperated me beyond endurance. In my indignation the word 'Scoundrel!' escaped me. I subsequently devised a way to offer M. de Mornand the reparation due him, however. Hence the wound which was to serve as a sort of memento, and hence my resolve to prevent M. de Mornand from marrying Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and I

have succeeded, for I defy him now to venture into the presence of the richest heiress in France, even if he delivers a dozen more philanthropical speeches on the cod fisheries, or even under your protection, baron, — you the most exemplary, admirable, and high-minded of guardians, who were not only willing, but eager, to sacrifice your ward's happiness and welfare to your absurd ambition."

And as no one made any attempt to reply, the hunchback continued:

"Ah, gentlemen, these villainies are of such frequent occurrence in society that it would be well to make an example of at least one offender. Because such shameful things often occur among respectable people, is that any reason they should go unpunished? What! there is a prison cell for poor devils who make a few louis by cheating at cards, and there is no pillory in which to place people who, by means of false pretences and foul lies, endeavour to secure possession of an enormous fortune, and plot in cold blood to enchain for ever an innocent child, whose only crime is the possession of a colossal fortune, which, unbeknown to her, excites the most shameless cupidity in those around her! And when these men succeed, people praise them and envy them and welcome them to their houses. People praise their shrewdness and go into ecstasies over their good fortune! Yes, for thanks to the wealth acquired by such unworthy means, they will entertain magnificently, and their gold not only enables them to gratify their every wish, but to attain any official position, no matter how exalted. The unfortunate woman who has enriched them, and whom they have so basely deceived, weeps her life away or plunges into a career of dissipation in order to forget her misery. Ah, gentlemen, I have at least had the satisfaction of bringing two scoundrels to grief, for M. de Macreuse, whom I drove from this house a few minutes ago, had devised a similar scheme."

"You are outwitted like the fool that you are, and it has been very cleverly done," De Ravil whispered in the ear of his friend, who stood as if petrified. "I will never forgive you as long as I live for having made me lose my percentage on that dowry."

Noble and generous sentiments exert such an irresistible influence sometimes that, after the hunchback's scathing words, M. de Mornand felt that he was censured by every one. Not a voice was lifted in his defence, but fortunately the termination of the quadrille brought quite a crowd of people into the gallery, and the prospective minister was thus afforded an opportunity to make his escape, pale and agitated, and without having been able to find a word to say in refutation of M. de Maillefort's grievous charges.

The marquis then rejoined Madame de la Rochaiguë, who was as entirely in the dark concerning what had just taken place as Ernestine.

"It is absolutely necessary that you take Mlle. de Beaumesnil away at once," M. de Maillefort said to the baroness. "Her presence here is no longer desirable. Yes, my dear child," added the marquis, turning to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, "the unpleasant curiosity you excite is increasing, instead of diminishing. To-morrow I will tell you all, but now take my advice and go home at once."

"Oh, gladly, monsieur," replied Ernestine, "for I am in misery."

So the young girl rose and took the arm of Madame de la Rochaiguë, who said to the hunchback, in a tone of the liveliest gratitude:

"I understand the situation now, I think. M. de Mornand had also entered the lists, it seems."

"We will talk all this over to-morrow. Now, in Heaven's name, take Mlle. de Beaumesnil away at once!"

"Ah, you are certainly our guardian angel, my dear

marquis," whispered Madame de la Rochaiguë. "I was wise to confide in you!"

"Yes, yes, but for pity's sake, get Mlle. de Beaumesnil away."

The orphan cast a quick glance of gratitude at the hunchback, then, agitated and almost terrified by the exciting events of the evening, she left the ballroom in company with Madame de la Rochaiguë; but M. de Maillefort remained, unwilling to appear to leave under cover of the sort of stupor his daring act had caused.

De Ravil, like a true cynic, had no sooner witnessed the ruin of his friend Mornand's hopes than he abandoned him then and there. The future minister had thrown himself into a cab, but Ravil wended his way homeward on foot, reviewing the events that had just occurred, and comparing the overthrow of M. de Mornand with that of M. de Macreuse.

As he turned the corner of the street on which Madame de Mirecourt's house stood, De Ravil saw in the bright moonlight a man a short distance ahead of him, walking now slowly, now with feverish haste.

The agitated bearing of this man excited the cynic's curiosity. He quickened his pace, and soon recognised M. de Macreuse, who could not tear himself away from the house where the marquis lingered, — the marquis whose heart Macreuse would have torn from his breast, had he been able to do it.

Yielding to a truly diabolical impulse, Ravil approached Macreuse, and said:

"Good evening, M. de Macreuse."

The abbé's protégé raised his head, and the evil passions that filled his heart could be read so plainly in his face that De Ravil congratulated himself upon his idea.

"What do you want?" Macreuse demanded, brusquely, not recognising De Ravil at the first glance. Then looking at him more attentively, he said:

"Ah, it is you, M. de Ravil; excuse me."

He made a movement as if about to walk on, but De Ravil checked him by saying:

"M. de Macreuse, I feel sure that we are likely to understand and be of service to each other."

"In what way, monsieur?"

"We hate the same man, that is something."

"Whom?"

"M. de Maillefort."

"So you, too, hate him?"

"With a deadly hatred."

"Well, what of it, monsieur?"

"Well, having the same animosity, we may have the same interests."

"I do not understand you, M. de Ravil."

"M. de Macreuse, you are a much too gifted and energetic man to allow yourself to be discouraged by one setback."

"What setback, monsieur?"

"So I will take you into my confidence. I had a fool of a friend, known to you as M. de Mornand, who had designs upon the same heiress that you did."

"M. de Mornand?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, a few minutes after your hasty departure, that d—d marquis exposed him as he had exposed you. That is to say, he has rendered my imbecile friend's marriage with the little Beaumesnil an impossibility."

"But what difference does it make to you whether the heiress does or does not marry your friend?"

"The devil! A great deal of difference! I went into the affair with the expectation of getting a handsome percentage on the dowry, so that accursed hunchback ruined me in ruining Mornand. Do you understand now?"

"Perfectly."

"Mornand is too much of a milksop — too blubbery, in short, to make any attempt to recover from his setback or even to console himself by revenge."

"Revenge? Upon whom?"

"Upon that little ninny of an heiress, and indirectly upon that d—d hunchback. But let me assure you that I am not one of those blockheads who thirst for revenge alone; it is a profitable revenge I am after every time."

"Profitable?"

"Yes, very profitable, and I can furnish the materials for it, too."

"You? And what are your materials, pray?"

"Excuse me. I possess a very valuable secret."

"In relation to Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"The same. I can work up this valuable secret alone, however, just as well."

"And yet you offer —"

"To go shares with you? Nothing of the kind. You would think me a simpleton if I did, and you've no fondness for simpletons."

"Then, monsieur, to what purpose —?"

"You did not embark in such an important enterprise — as my imbecile friend the politician would say — you did not embark in such an important enterprise as your marriage with the greatest heiress in France without backers, without powerful intermediaries and without strong probabilities of success. One does not make such a blunder as that when one is the founder of the St. Polycarpe Mission, — a work, by the way, which has convinced me that you are a remarkably able man, and gained you my sincere admiration. This being the case, you are too high-spirited to submit quietly to such a setback to the atrocious treatment you have received from M. de Maillefort. You may, perhaps, have some means of retrieving your lost ground, or of obtaining your object in some other way, and so long as the little Beaumesnil remains single, a man like you does not abandon hope."

"Well, so be it, monsieur; suppose I have not given up all hope, what then?"

"If you admit that, I will propose that we pool, you, your means of success, and I, my secret. If your hopes are realised, we will not make use of my secret; if they are not realised, my secret will remain a luscious, juicy pear to quench our thirst. In short, if you marry the heiress, you will give me a small percentage on her dowry; if you do not marry her, I will give you a part of the money my secret will gain for me, that is, if the aforesaid secret can not be made to render you valuable assistance in your new attempt."

"All this is worthy of attention," answered Macreuse, after a moment's reflection, for he, too, was beginning to think that he and De Ravil were, indeed, congenial spirits. "But it would be well for me to know what this secret is, and what its influence is likely to be."

"Give me your arm, my dear M. de Macreuse, I am going to state the case plainly to you, for I have nothing to gain by deceiving you, as you will soon see for yourself."

The two men walked on arm in arm and were soon lost in the shadow of the tall houses that bordered one edge of the sidewalk.

CHAPTER XVI.

DISINTERESTED AFFECTION.

MLLE. DE BEAUMESNIL had promised Herminie that she would come and see her Friday morning, or, in other words, on the day immediately following the ball which the richest heiress in France had attended at Madame de Mirecourt's house, and where M. de Macreuse and M. de Mornand had seen their villainous projects exposed by the Marquis de Maillefort.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil had left the ballroom deeply distressed and terrified by the discoveries she made in relation to her suitors, discoveries which had been completed by Gerald's frank confession concerning the manner in which an heiress was married off; and feeling quite as much contempt as aversion, now, for her guardian and his family, the young girl realised the necessity of taking some decisive action in the matter, her present relations with the Rochaiguës having become intolerable.

It was consequently necessary for her to ask the protection and counsel of some person outside of this family of sage advisers.

Ernestine knew only two persons whom she could trust, — Herminie and M. de Maillefort.

In order to open her heart to Herminie Mlle. de Beaumesnil would be obliged to confess who she really was, but though she had no intention of deferring this revelation much longer, she did long to enjoy once more the inexpressible happiness of receiving those evidences of tender friendship which the duchess supposed she was

lavishing upon a poor orphan girl who had to work for her living.

"Heaven grant that she will love me just as much when she knows that I am rich!" thought the heiress, anxiously. "Heaven grant that this discovery may not impair the friendship that a person of Herminie's proud and sensitive nature feels for me!"

Faithful to her promise, and rejoiced to know how entirely worthy Gerald was of Herminie's love, Mlle. de Beaumesnil, accompanied by Madame Laîné, who was to wait for her in the cab, as usual, started early Friday morning for the home of the duchess, for it is needless to say that, after M. de Macreuse's humiliation of the evening before, Mlle. Helena did not come to take her brother's ward to church as usual.

As she neared her friend's home, Ernestine became very uneasy, for though, since her conversation with M. de Senneterre the evening before, the young girl knew for a certainty how perfectly honourable Gerald's intentions were, and how passionately he loved Herminie, Mlle. de Beaumesnil foresaw only too plainly the many difficulties to be overcome before a marriage between the young duke and a penniless music teacher could be brought about.

When Ernestine reached her friend's house, Herminie sprang forward to meet her and embraced her tenderly.

"Ah, I was sure you would not forget your promise, Ernestine," she cried, "for did I not tell you what a comfort your coming would be to me?"

"I trust it may prove so, indeed, my dear Herminie. Have you regained a little of your wonted courage? Are you not more hopeful?"

The duchess shook her head sadly.

"Alas! I can not say that I see any reason to hope," she replied, "but don't let us talk of my troubles now, Ernestine. We will discuss them again when the sub-

ject that is now on my mind has ceased to divert my thoughts from them."

"To what subject do you refer?"

"It is a matter that concerns you, Ernestine."

"Me?"

"It is a matter that may exert a very happy influence over your future, my poor, lonely child."

"What do you mean, Herminie?"

"I am not the proper person to explain this mystery to you. I was asked to do so, but fearing I might influence you by the manner in which I presented the case, I refused, wishing your decision to be unbiased by any outside influence, though I will express my opinion afterwards if you wish."

"Good Heavens! What you say, Herminie, mystifies me more and more. What is this very important project?"

"The last time you were here, and while Commander Bernard was again expressing his fervent gratitude to you, M. Olivier begged me to see him the next day on a very important matter, he said. I complied with his request, and the matter was indeed one of grave importance, so grave, in fact, that he asked me to act as his intermediary with you, which I refused to do for reasons I have already explained."

"Ah, then the matter has some connection with M. Olivier?"

"Yes, and I thought it would be better for him to make his wishes known himself, in my presence, if you have no objection."

"And you advise me to grant M. Olivier a hearing, my dear Herminie?"

"I do, Ernestine, because whatever happens and whatever your decision may be, you will, I am sure, be both proud and happy to have heard what he has to tell you."

"Then I am to see M. Olivier. But when, Herminie?"

"To-day, now, if you desire it."

"Where is he?"

"Out in the garden. Counting upon a visit from you this morning, I said to him: 'Come Friday morning. You will not mind waiting in the garden awhile, and if Ernestine consents to see you, I will send for you.'"

"Very well, then, Herminie, have the goodness to send M. Olivier word that I should be pleased to see him."

A moment afterwards M. Olivier Raymond was ushered into the room by Madame Moufflon, the concierge.

"M. Olivier," said Herminie, "Ernestine is ready to listen to you. You know my friendship for her. You know, too, how highly I esteem you, so I trust my presence will prove no restraint."

"I particularly desire your presence, Mlle. Herminie, as I shall, perhaps, find it necessary to appeal to your memory in support of some of my statements," replied Olivier. Then, turning to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, he continued, without making any attempt to conceal his emotion:

"Mademoiselle, permit me to say, first of all, that I must have perfect confidence in the rectitude of my intentions to venture upon the rather peculiar step I am about to take."

"I am certain, in advance, M. Olivier, that this step is worthy of you, of me, and of the friend that is listening to us."

"I think so, too, mademoiselle, so I am going to speak to you in all sincerity, for you may recollect that once before you expressed yourself as grateful to me for my frankness."

"I was certainly deeply touched by it, as Herminie will tell you, M. Olivier."

"Mlle. Herminie can also testify to the deep interest you inspired in my heart, mademoiselle, I will not say from the time of the charity dance," added Olivier, with a faint smile, but rather from the time of the conversation I had with you that evening."

"It is perfectly true, my dear Ernestine," said Herminie, "that, after your departure, M. Olivier seemed to be deeply touched by the strange mixture of melancholy, frankness, and originality, that he had noticed in your conversation, and his interest seemed to be greatly increased when I told him, without committing any breach of confidence, I trust, that I felt sure your life was far from happy."

"The truth is never a breach of confidence, my dear Herminie. Though one ought, of course, to conceal one's unhappiness from the indifferent, one should at least have the consolation of confessing it to one's friends."

"Then you may be able to understand, mademoiselle," said Olivier, "that, by reason of the very peculiar circumstances of our first interview, there sprang up in my heart, not one of those sudden and violent emotions one sometimes experiences, — I should be uttering an untruth if I asserted this, — but an emotion full of sweetness and charm, together with a lively solicitude for you, a solicitude which memory and reflection rendered more and more keen. Such were my feelings, mademoiselle, when you, at the risk of your own life, saved the uncle whom I love as a father from a horrible death. Then, gratitude and the admiration which so noble an act richly merited were added to the sentiments I already entertained for you, but I should, probably, never have dared to give expression to these feelings had it not been for the unexpected good fortune that has befallen me."

After pausing an instant, as if uncertain whether he had better go on, Olivier added:

"And now, mademoiselle, I find myself again obliged to remind myself and to remind you that you love sincerity above all things."

"Yes, M. Olivier, I do both love and appreciate sincerity above all things."

"Well, mademoiselle, to speak frankly, you are not happy, and the persons with whom you live are not congenial to you. Is this not so?"

"Yes, M. Olivier. The only happiness I have known since my parents' death dates from the hour of my entrance into Madame Herbaut's house."

"I do not wish to sadden you, mademoiselle," continued Olivier, kindly, even tenderly. "I am loath, too, to remind you how hard and precarious the life of a young girl who is dependent upon her own exertions is, and yet, mademoiselle, however courageous and industrious you may be, you cannot forget that you are an orphan, surrounded by selfish, hard-hearted persons, who would cruelly desert you, perhaps, if want or sickness should be your portion, or manifest a humiliating pity towards you which would be even more hard to bear than heartless desertion."

"You are perfectly right, monsieur. Privations, disdain, desertion, these are all I have to expect from the persons around me if I should become really destitute."

"You exposed to disdain and privations, never!" exclaimed Olivier. "No, you must not, you shall not, be treated thus," he continued. "I know that you can count upon Mlle. Herminie's devoted friendship; but poor and honest people like ourselves must not deceive ourselves. Mlle. Herminie may need your aid herself some day. Besides, two devoted friends are better than one, so I would gladly offer myself as well, if I only knew that you had half as much confidence in me as I have true and faithful affection for you."

"Monsieur," said Ernestine, trembling, and casting down her eyes, "I do not know — I am not sure that I ought — "

"Listen one moment, mademoiselle. If I were still a common soldier, for to be a common soldier and a non-commissioned officer really amount to the same thing, I should not have spoken to you on this subject. I

should have tried to forget, not my gratitude, but the sentiment that renders it doubly dear to me. Whether I should have succeeded or not, I cannot say. But now I am an officer, and that means a competence to me. Will you allow me to offer this competence to you?"

"Such a future far exceeds my wildest hopes," replied Ernestine, only partially concealing the intense joy Olivier's words caused her.

"Ah, mademoiselle, if you should make me happy by an acceptance of this offer, far from feeling that I was released from a sacred obligation, I should realise that I had only contracted another, — for I should owe the happiness of my life to you, though this debt, at least, I should be certain to pay by my love and devotion. Yes, for why should I not say it, there can be no love deeper or more honourable than mine. There is no cause more holy and generous than that which lies so near my heart."

On hearing Olivier utter these words, in tones of intense earnestness and profound sincerity, Mlle. de Beaumesnil experienced a rapturous emotion hitherto unknown to her, and a vivid blush dyed her throat and brow as she cast a timid glance at Olivier's handsome, manly face, now radiant with love and hope.

So Ernestine had not been mistaken as to the meaning of Olivier's look when he heard, in her presence, of his promotion. The girl saw and felt that she was loved, ardently loved. The proofs of it were so unmistakable, the causes that had produced it were so noble, that she could not doubt its reality.

And to believe, understand, and appreciate all that is noble, tender, and charming in such a love, is that not equivalent to sharing it, above all when one has lived, like Mlle. de Beaumesnil, a prey to apprehensions which recent events had more than justified, and to a distrust which had threatened to destroy all her hopes of future happiness?

And what inexpressible joy it was for her to be able to say to herself:

"It is I, the poor, nameless, penniless orphan, that he loves, because I have proved myself to be sincere, brave, and generous. And I am so truly loved that he offers a life of comparative ease, and an honourable position to me, who seemed destined to a life of poverty, if not absolute want."

And Mlle. de Beaumesnil, agitated by a thousand new emotions, blushing and smiling at the same time, seized the hand of Herminie, by whom she was sitting, and, thus avoiding the necessity of any direct reply to Olivier's proposal, exclaimed:

"You were right, Herminie; I have, indeed, good reason to be proud of M. Olivier's offer."

"And do you accept this offer, Ernestine?" asked Herminie, certain what her friend's reply would be.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil, with a graceful, almost childish movement, threw her arms around the neck of the duchess, kissed her tenderly, and said, almost in a whisper:

"Yes — I accept it."

But she still kept her face almost hidden on her friend's bosom, while Herminie, scarcely able to restrain her tears of sympathetic emotion, turned to the young officer, who was himself deeply moved by this charming scene, and said:

"Ernestine accepts, M. Olivier. I am delighted both on your account and hers, for from this time I feel that her happiness is certain."

"Ah, yes, mademoiselle," cried Olivier, his face radiant with joy, "for from this moment I have the right to devote my life to Mlle. Ernestine."

"I believe in you, and in my future happiness, M. Olivier," said mademoiselle, shyly, raising her head until it rested on Herminie's shoulder. Then, with cheeks slightly flushed, and her beautiful eyes sparkling with

purest joy, the girl timidly extended her little hand to the young man.

Olivier trembled, as he touched this hand which he dared not carry to his lips, but he pressed it tenderly with mingled love and deference.

Then, without trying to conceal the tears that filled his eyes, he said:

"By this dear hand so generously given, mademoiselle, I swear to you, and ask your friend to bear witness to my vow, I swear that my life shall be consecrated to your happiness."

CHAPTER XVII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

AFTER the vows thus plighted by Mlle. de Beaumesnil and Olivier Raymond in Herminie's presence, the three actors in the scene maintained an almost solemn silence for several minutes.

All three fully realised the gravity of the obligation assumed.

"How delightful it is to be rich," thought Olivier, "for I am rich in comparison with this dear child who has only her own labour to depend upon. What happiness it gives me to be able to assure her an existence superior even to her wildest dreams."

His features were radiant with the delight of this thought, as he broke the silence by saying to Mlle. de Beaumesnil:

"Until I became sure of your consent, mademoiselle, I did not care to broach the subject to your relative, though I have every reason to hope she will accede to my request. Do you not think so? As for my uncle, need I tell you that his joy will almost equal mine, when he knows that he can call you his daughter? If you think proper, mademoiselle, he had better be the one, perhaps, to go to your relative and make known my request."

This proposal threw Ernestine into a state of deep perplexity. Yielding to an outburst of irresistible confidence, that told her that every possible guarantee of safety and happiness would be found in Olivier, she had never once thought of the many difficulties that

were sure to arise from the maintenance of the incognito which she dared not throw off at once, however.

But already somewhat familiar with the sudden dilemmas resulting from the position in which she had placed herself, Mlle. de Beaumesnil replied, after a moment's reflection:

"I am hardly able to say to-day whether it had better be M. Bernard or Herminie who goes to my relative to inform her of your intentions — and of my consent. I will think the matter over, and let you know my decision the next time I see you."

"Ernestine is right, M. Olivier," remarked Herminie; "from what I have heard of her relative's disposition, it would be advisable to act with prudence, as — as the consent of this parent is indispensable to Ernestine's marriage."

"I shall be guided entirely by Mlle. Ernestine and by you, Mlle. Herminie, in this matter. Sure of Mlle. Ernestine's consent, I can wait with patience. If you knew with what happiness I think of the future — our future, I can say now! And my brave, kind uncle, how happy he will be surrounded by our care, for it will not be at all unpleasant to you to live with him, will it, Mlle. Ernestine? He is so good and kind, and it would make him so happy to have us with him!"

"Did you not tell me that he would call me his daughter, M. Olivier? I shall be very proud of that title and try to deserve it."

"Tell me, Mlle. Herminie," asked Olivier, addressing the duchess, "after such a reply, can there be a happier man in the world than I?"

"No, M. Olivier," replied the duchess, smothering a sigh as she thought how she, too, might have enjoyed the same felicity if Gerald's position had been as modest as Olivier's; "no, I do not believe there can be any greater happiness than yours, nor any that is more richly deserved."

"We shall not be high and mighty seigneurs, Mlle. Ernestine," said Olivier, smiling, "for a second lieutenant is no great things, but even a single epaulette honourably worn levels all conditions. Besides, I am young, and I shall soon have two epaulettes instead of one, some day I shall become a major, perhaps even a colonel."

"Beware of ambition, M. Olivier," said Ernestine, smiling in her turn.

"That is true. It seems to me that I am devoured with ambition now. It would give me such happiness to see you enjoy the consideration with which the wife of a colonel is surrounded! My poor uncle, too, how proud he would be to see me hold that rank. Then, think of it, Mlle. Ernestine, we should be millionaires on a colonel's pay. And what pleasure it would give me to surround you with comforts and even luxuries enough to make you forget the hardships of your youth, and to at last see my poor uncle placed above the reach of want, for he is sometimes subjected to great privations!"

"Yes, in spite of your generous assistance, M. Olivier," said Ernestine, with deep emotion, "and in spite of the hard work you have been doing all through your furlough."

"Ah, you have been tattling, Mlle. Herminie," said Olivier, gaily.

"At all events, I was entirely disinterested," she retorted; "for when I told Ernestine all the good I knew of you, M. Olivier, I was far from suspecting that you would corroborate my statements so soon."

"And I must tell M. Olivier, with that frankness on which he sets such store, that he misjudges me very much if he thinks I am pining for the luxury he promises me," said Ernestine, smiling.

"And I," said Olivier, "shall reply with equal frankness that I am terribly selfish, and that, in hoping to be able to surround Mlle. Ernestine with luxury, I am thinking only of the pleasure it will give me."

"And I, who am Reason personified," said Herminie, with a melancholy smile, "I shall tell Mlle. Ernestine and M. Olivier that they are two foolish children to indulge in these golden visions. The present should content them."

"Yes, I admit it is wrong," responded Olivier, gaily. "Just see where ambition leads one! I am dreaming of becoming a colonel, instead of saying to myself that my worthy uncle and myself — thanks to my pay as a second lieutenant — have never been so rich before. Think of it, nearly six thousand francs a year — for us two. What happiness to be able to say, 'For us three, Mlle. Ernestine!'"

"Six thousand francs a year? Why, that is an enormous amount," exclaimed the richest heiress in France. "How can any one spend all that money?"

"Poor child!" Olivier said to himself, exulting in his new-found prosperity, "I thought as much. She has been so poor up to this time, that it seems an immense fortune to her."

But he said aloud:

"We shall manage to spend our three thousand francs, all the same, I expect, Mlle. Ernestine. In the first place, I shall always insist upon your being nicely dressed, in simple but elegant toilets. Our rank requires it, you you know, mademoiselle. An officer's wife — why, the army regulations require her to be well dressed, you understand."

"If the dignity of your rank is at stake, why, I submit, of course," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil, laughing, "but only on condition that your dear uncle shall have a pretty garden, as he is so fond of flowers."

"That is understood, Mlle. Ernestine. We can easily find a snug little apartment with a garden in a quiet part of the town, for as I shall belong to the garrison we can not live in the Batignolles any longer. But — great Heavens —"

"What is the matter, M. Olivier?"

"Are you a Bonapartist, Mlle. Ernestine?" inquired the young officer, with comical seriousness.

"Why certainly, M. Olivier. I admire the emperor very much. But why do you ask that question?"

"Then we are lost, mademoiselle, for my poor uncle shelters beneath his roof the most implacable enemy of the great Napoleon that ever lived."

"Indeed!"

"You will shudder to hear her frightful stories of his atrocities; but seriously, Mlle. Ernestine, I shall be obliged to ask your indulgence, and your affection as well, for a very worthy woman, my uncle's housekeeper, who during the ten years she has been in his employ has never allowed a day to pass without lavishing every attention upon him, and without quarrelling with him in the most outrageous manner on the subject of the Corsican ogre."

"Very well, M. Olivier, I will disclose my admiration for the great emperor only to your dear uncle, and play the hypocrite before this worthy woman. Oh, you shall see; I am very politic, and she will love me in spite of my Bonapartism."

Madame Moufflon, the concierge, having rapped at the door, interrupted the conversation by handing a letter to Herminie, who, recognising the handwriting as that of M. de Maillefort, told the portress to ask the messenger to wait, as there might be an answer required.

So Olivier, fearing that a longer stay would be indiscreet, and being also in a hurry to find Commander Bernard, and report the success of his wooing, said to Mlle. de Beaumesnil:

"I came here in a very anxious frame of mind, Mlle. Ernestine. Thanks to you, I am going away the happiest and most contented of men. I need not tell you how impatiently I shall await your decision in regard to your relative. If you think it advisable for my uncle to ap-

proach her on the subject, please let me know as soon as possible."

"I will do so at our next interview, which had better take place here, M. Olivier."

"May I not be permitted to bring my uncle?" asked Olivier. "There is so much that he wishes to say to you. He will be so anxious to see you, too, that it would hardly be fair to deny him the favour, for there is nothing he wouldn't be capable of doing in order to reach you, and tell you of his joy and gratitude."

"Herminie and I will not force your dear uncle to any extreme measures, for I, myself, am very impatient to see him again, so *à bientôt*, M. Olivier."

"*A bientôt*, mademoiselle."

And Olivier departed, leaving the two girls alone together.

Herminie then opened M. de Maillefort's letter. It read as follows:

"It is still to-morrow, Saturday, my dear child, that I shall call to take you to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, only, if agreeable to you, I will come at three in the afternoon, instead of at noon as we agreed.

"A cousin-german of mine, the Prince Duc de Haut-Martel, the head of our house, has just died in Hungary.

"I received this news through the Austrian ambassador, upon whom I must call early to-morrow morning for some necessary formalities, which, to my great regret, will prevent me from fulfilling my engagement with you as early as I promised.

"I shall see you, then, to-morrow, my dear child,

"Affectionately,

"MAILLEFORT."

"Ernestine, you will excuse me to write a few words in answer to this letter, will you not?" asked Herminie, seating herself at the table.

So, while the duchess was writing to M. de Maillefort, Mlle. de Beaumesnil reflected with growing satisfaction upon the engagement she had just contracted with Olivier.

The duchess wrote M. de Maillefort that she would expect him at three the following afternoon, then rang for Madame Moufflon, and asked her to deliver the note to the messenger.

When the portress had left the room, Herminie returned to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and, kissing her affectionately, asked:

"You are very happy, are you not, Ernestine?"

"Yes, very happy, Herminie," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil, "and it was here in your home that this happiness came to me, my dear friend. How generous M. Olivier is! How much he must esteem and love me for him to desire to marry me, when his position is so superior to mine! That, in itself, is enough to make me adore him, and to make me place implicit faith in his promises. With what a feeling of security I can now face the future, however trying may be the circumstances in which I find myself to-day!"

"Yes, Ernestine, you are indeed certain of happiness. Your life cannot fail to be pleasant and fortunate. To love and to be loved worthily is, indeed, a fate to be envied."

And as the contrast between her own future and that of her friend struck her, the poor duchess could not help bursting into tears.

"It is, indeed, true that happiness is always selfish!" cried Ernestine. "Oh, Herminie, forgive me, forgive me! How much you must have suffered! Every word of our conversation with M. Olivier must have pierced your soul! You heard us talk of our mutual love, of our hope of a blissful future, and all the while you felt that you, perhaps, would have to renounce all such joys. Ah, our thoughtlessness must have pained you deeply, my dear Herminie."

"No, no, Ernestine," said the poor duchess, drying her eyes, "on the contrary, your happiness has been a great consolation to me. Has it not enabled me to forget my own grief and despair all the morning?"

"Despair? But why do you say that? M. de Senneterre is worthy of you," cried Ernestine, thoughtlessly, remembering only her conversation with the young duke the evening before. "He loves you as you deserve to be loved, I know it."

"You know it, Ernestine? How do you know it?"

"I mean that — that I am sure of it, Herminie," replied Ernestine, much embarrassed. "All you have told me about him convinces me that you could not have placed your affections more wisely. The obstacles to your union are great, I admit, but by no means insurmountable."

"But they are, Ernestine. I have never told you before, but my own sense of dignity will not permit me to marry M. de Senneterre, unless his mother comes here and tells me that she consents to my marriage with her son. Without that, nothing could induce me to enter this aristocratic family."

"Oh, Herminie, how much I admire your pride!" exclaimed Ernestine. "And what does M. de Senneterre say?"

"When M. Olivier told him my resolution, far from appearing either surprised or shocked, Gerald replied: 'What Herminie asks is only just. Her dignity, as well as mine, requires it. Despair is cowardly and foolish. It is for me to find the means of compelling my mother to acknowledge the worth of the woman to whom I shall be proud to give my name.' Noble and touching words, were they not, Ernestine?"

"You are right, Herminie."

"My mother loves me devotedly,' added M. de Senneterre, 'and nothing is impossible to an ardent lover. I shall find a way to convince my mother of the wisdom

of my choice, and to induce her to make the advances Herminie has a right to expect. How I shall do it, I cannot say, but I shall do it, for Herminie's happiness and mine are at stake.'

"And does not this courageous resolve inspire you with some hope?" asked Ernestine.

The duchess shook her head sadly as she replied:

"Gerald is sincere in his determination, but he deceives himself. All I have heard of his mother convinces me that this haughty woman will never —"

"Never! why do you say never?" cried Ernestine, interrupting her friend. "Ah, Herminie, you have no idea how much the love of a man like M. de Senneterre can accomplish. His mother is a very proud woman, you say; so much the better. She would show herself pitiless to any cowardly humility, while your eminently proper pride will be sure to impress her, as she, too, is proud; so she will at least be obliged to esteem and respect you. That will be one great advantage gained; her love for her son will do the rest, for you do not know how she idolises him. She loves him so devotedly, in fact, that she has so far forgotten herself as to mix herself up in a shameful conspiracy in order to secure him an immense fortune by an act unworthy of him. Why, then, is her maternal love likely to fail when a worthy, commendable act on her part is alone needed to assure her son's happiness? Believe me, Herminie, no one ever need despair when there is a mother's heart to appeal to."

"Really, Ernestine, you amaze me. You speak of M. de Senneterre and his family as if you knew them."

"Well, I may as well admit, my dear Herminie," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil, unable to resist her desire to allay her friend's fears and to encourage her to hope, "that, knowing how unhappy you were, I managed to make some inquiries about the Senneterre family through my relative."

"But how?"

"She knows one of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's servants."

"Your relative does?"

"Yes, and she discovered in this way that Madame de Senneterre has been mixed up in an unfortunate scheme to bring about a marriage between her son and Mlle. de Beaumesnil, that rich heiress."

"Gerald was to marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil?" exclaimed Herminie.

"Yes, but he nobly refused. Her immense fortune has no attraction for him, because he loves you, — loves you devotedly, Herminie."

"Is this true?" exclaimed the duchess, delightedly. "Are you sure of what you say, Ernestine?"

"Perfectly sure."

"It is not so much that this disinterestedness on Gerald's part astonishes me," said Herminie, "as that —"

"That you are proud of this new proof of his love. Am I not right?"

"Yes, yes," exclaimed the duchess, her hopes reviving in spite of herself. "But once more, I can not help asking if you are perfectly sure of what you say? My poor child, you are so anxious to see me happy that I am afraid you have lent too ready an ear to these reports, for servants' gossip, you know, is proverbially unreliable. Do you know whether Gerald has ever met Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Once or twice, I think my relative told me. But why do you ask that question, Herminie?"

"Because it seems to me that I shall feel very uncomfortable to-morrow, knowing that there has been some talk of a marriage between Gerald and Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"Why, what is to happen to-morrow, Herminie?"

"I am to give Mlle. de Beaumesnil her first music lesson."

"To-morrow?" exclaimed Ernestine, without concealing her surprise.

"Read this letter, my dear," replied the duchess. "It is from that gentleman, the hunchback, you remember, that you once met here."

"M. de Maillefort probably had his reasons for not warning me of his intentions," Ernestine said to herself, as she perused the missive. "I am glad that he is hastening the denouement, however, for my powers of dissimulation are nearly exhausted. What a relief it will be to confess all!"

As she returned the letter, Ernestine asked:

"What difference does it make to you, Herminie, if there has been some talk of a marriage between M. de Senneterre and Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"I do not know, but I somehow feel that it places me in a false, almost painful position towards that young lady, and if I had not promised M. de Maillefort—"

"What would you do?"

"I would abandon this visit, which now causes me a sort of vague uneasiness."

"But you have promised, Herminie, and you can not break your word. Besides, is not Mlle. de Beaumesnil the child of the lady whom you loved so much, and who so often talked to you about her dear daughter? Think of it, Herminie; would it not be wrong to give up going to see her? Do you not at least owe that to her mother's memory?"

"You are right, Ernestine. I shall have to go, and yet—"

"Who knows, Herminie, but your acquaintance with this young girl will prove of benefit to both of you. I scarcely know why, but I prophesy good from this visit, and I certainly prove my disinterestedness by doing so, for devoted friendship is naturally jealous. But it is growing late, my friend, and I must go. I will write to you to-morrow."

The duchess sat silent and evidently absorbed in thought for a moment.

"Ah, Ernestine," she exclaimed at last, "I can not tell you all the strange thoughts that are passing through my mind. Gerald's noble disinterestedness, my approaching interview with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, your disclosures in relation to the character of Madame de Senneterre, who, being proud herself, can, perhaps, better understand the demands of my pride,—all this agitates me deeply. Nevertheless, though I was so full of despair a few minutes ago, I now hope, in spite of myself, and thanks to you, my dear friend, my heart is much less heavy than when you came."

Consideration for M. de Maillefort's plans alone prevented Ernestine from putting an end to her friend's anxiety and increasing her hope by giving her further proofs of Gerald's love as well as of his nobility of character, but remembering that all this mystery would soon be cleared up, she carried her secret away with her when she parted from Herminie.

The following afternoon, according to promise, M. de Maillefort called for the duchess, and the two immediately started for Mlle. de Beaumesnil's residence.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY.

BEFORE going to Herminie's, Friday morning, Mlle. de Beaumesnil had had no conversation with M. de la Rochaiguë and Mlle. Helena on the subject of M. de Macreuse and M. de Mornand.

On her return from the ball the night before, Ernestine had pleaded fatigue as an excuse for at once retiring to her room, and she had left the house early the next morning, in company with Madame Laîné.

One can easily imagine the bitter reproaches and recriminations that were interchanged between the baron and his wife and sister after returning from the entertainment, where their secret plans had been so ruthlessly unveiled.

Madame de la Rochaiguë, still confident of the speedy marriage of M. de Senneterre and Mlle. de Beaumesnil, was pitiless in her triumph, which she scarcely took the pains to conceal now, and quite overwhelmed the baron and his sister by her reproaches and sarcasms.

The devotee replied, sweetly and patiently, that "the success of the proud and the wicked was fleeting, but that the just, though laid low for a time, would soon rise again, radiant in glory."

The baron, who was less versed in Biblical diction, declared that his wife did not know him yet, and that, though he could not compel Mlle. de Beaumesnil to marry M. de Mornand, after the deplorable scene of the evening before, he should nevertheless completely,

absolutely, and irrevocably refuse his consent to any other marriage until mademoiselle attained her majority.

Ernestine, on her return from Herminie's, had been tenderly welcomed by Madame de la Rochaiguë, who informed her that the baron had declared his intention of opposing any marriage whatever until his ward became of age, but that all this did not make the slightest difference, as he would change his mind within twenty-four hours if he discovered that there was any possibility of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's marriage with M. de Senneterre.

But when the baroness added that it would be advisable for Ernestine to receive Gerald's mother on the following day, as that lady wished to come to some definite understanding in relation to her son's marriage with the heiress, the young girl replied that, while she fully appreciated M. de Senneterre's merits, she would like to have a few days longer for reflection, hoping in this way to secure time to consult with M. de Maillefort and Herminie concerning her plans for the future. The baroness tried in vain to change Ernestine's decision, but the young girl was obdurate.

Considerably surprised, and not a little irritated by this refusal, the baroness remarked to the orphan, as she was leaving her:

"I forgot to inform you yesterday, my dear child, that after a talk with M. de Maillefort, who is now one of my best friends, and yours as well (you know how highly he speaks of M. de Senneterre), we decided to give you an opportunity to perform a truly charitable act. The idea originated with me, even prior to your arrival in Paris. There is a poor, but honest young girl, who was employed to play and sing to your poor dear mother during her last illness. This young girl is very proud, in spite of her poverty; so we thought you might assist her pecuniarily under the pretext of taking a few music lessons, and if you are willing to do so, the marquis will bring her to you to-morrow."

The reader can imagine Ernestine's response, and the impatience with which she awaited the coming of Herminie and her escort.

At last the long-looked-for hour arrived.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil had put on the same dress she had worn on her first visit to her friend's house, — a simply made gown of inexpensive lawn.

Soon a footman threw open the folding doors that led into the small drawing-room where the heiress usually sat, and announced, in a loud voice:

"M. le Marquis de Maillefort."

Herminie was with the hunchback, and for some reason or other seemed to be greatly agitated by the prospect of this meeting with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and as the duchess, whose bosom was heaving visibly, kept her eyes fixed upon the floor, the footman had time to close the door and make his escape before Herminie recognised Ernestine.

The marquis, who was enjoying this little scene immensely, gave Mlle. de Beaumesnil a meaning glance just as Herminie, surprised at the long silence, ventured to raise her eyes.

"Ernestine, you here!" she exclaimed, taking a step towards her friend, then, intensely surprised, looked wonderingly at the marquis, as Mlle. de Beaumesnil, throwing herself upon Herminie's neck, embraced her tenderly, while tears of joy rolled down her cheeks.

"You are weeping, Ernestine!" said Herminie, more and more astonished, but still without the slightest suspicion of the truth, though her heart was throbbing with unwonted violence. "What is the matter with you, Ernestine?" she continued. "How do you happen to be here? You do not answer me. Good Heavens! I cannot imagine why I tremble so!"

And again the duchess turned inquiringly to the hunchback, whose eyes were dim with tears.

"I do not know, but it seems to me something extraor-

dinary is going on here, M. le marquis; tell me what all this means, I beseech you."

"It means, my dear child, that I was a true prophet when, in talking with you about your approaching interview with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, I told you that I felt sure this meeting would afford you much more pleasure than you anticipated."

"Then you knew that I would find Ernestine here, monsieur?"

"I was certain of it."

"You were certain of it?"

"Yes, there could be no doubt of it."

"Why do you say that?"

"For the simple reason that —"

"That what, monsieur?"

"Is it possible you don't suspect?"

"No, monsieur."

"That the two Ernestines are one and the same person."

The duchess was so far from suspecting the truth that she utterly failed to understand the import of the hunchback's reply at first, and repeated mechanically, gazing at him wonderingly all the while:

"The two Ernestines are one and the same person?"

Then seeing her friend gazing at her with an expression of ineffable joy and happiness, and with arms outstretched as if to embrace her, she exclaimed, overwhelmed with astonishment, and almost terror:

"Mlle. de Beaumesnil! Can it be — my God! can it be that you are Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Yes," exclaimed the hunchback, "she is Mlle. de Beaumesnil, the daughter of the lady who loved you so much, and to whom you were so deeply attached."

"Ernestine is my sister," thought the duchess.

This startling revelation, and the recollection of the strange way in which she had made Mlle. de Beaumesnil's acquaintance, as well as of the events which had

occurred since their first meeting, gave Herminie a sort of vertigo. Her brain seemed to whirl; she turned pale, and trembled so violently, that Ernestine was obliged to assist her to a neighbouring armchair.

There, kneeling beside her, and gazing up in her face with all a sister's tenderness, Mlle. de Beaumesnil took Herminie's hands in hers, and kissed them almost reverently, while the marquis stood contemplating this touching scene in silence.

"Pardon me," faltered Herminie, "but the surprise,—the trying position in which I find myself, mademoiselle—"

"Mademoiselle! Oh, do not call me that," exclaimed Mlle. de Beaumesnil. "Am I no longer your Ernestine, the orphan to whom you promised your friendship because you thought she was so unhappy? Alas! M. de Maillefort, your friend and mine, will tell you that I am indeed very unhappy, and that I am in even greater need of your tender affection than ever. What if I am no longer the poor little embroideress! The rich have their sorrows as well as the poor. In pity remember the words of my dying mother, who so often talked to you of me, and continue to love me for her sake."

"Have no fears on that score. You will always be dear, doubly dear to me," replied Herminie; "but you see I have scarcely recovered from my bewilderment. It seems like a dream to me, and when I think of the way in which I became acquainted with you, Ernestine, and of a thousand other things, I have to see you here close beside me, to believe that it is not really all a dream."

"Your surprise is very natural, my dear child," remarked the marquis, "and I myself, when I met Mlle. de Beaumesnil at your home a few days ago, was so overwhelmed with astonishment that, if something had not diverted your attention for a moment, you

would have perceived my amazement; but Ernestine begged me to keep her secret, and I did."

When Herminie had recovered from the shock sufficiently for her mind to become clear again, the first words she uttered were:

"But, Ernestine, how did you happen to come to Madame Herbaut's? What is the meaning of all this mystery? Why did you wish to attend that reunion?"

Ernestine, smiling sadly, took from a table the journal she had been writing, the journal dedicated to the memory of her mother, and, handing it to Herminie open at the page where were enumerated the divers reasons which had forced the richest heiress in France to resort to the painful test she had endured so heroically, the young girl said to the duchess:

"I anticipated these questions, Herminie, and, as I am anxious that you should deem me worthy of your affection, I beg you to read these pages. They speak the truth, for it is to the memory of my mother that they are dedicated. M. de Maillefort, I would like you to peruse their contents at the same time, so you can see that, though I unfortunately believed, for a time, the base slanders told me concerning you, your wise, though severe, lesson was not lost upon me, but gave me the courage to resort to a test that may, perhaps, seem strange to you, my dear Herminie."

The duchess took the book from Ernestine's hands. It was an interesting scene to see Herminie holding the open journal, while the marquis, leaning over the back of the armchair in which she was seated, read with her and like her, in silence, Mlle. de Beaumesnil's artless story.

That young girl watched both Herminie and the hunchback intently during the reading, evidently anxious to know if they would approve her motives.

All doubts on this subject were soon allayed, however, for touching and sympathetic exclamations speedily testified to the approval of both.

When the perusal was ended, the duchess, her eyes filled with tears of love and compassion, exclaimed:

"Ah, it is not friendship alone that I feel for you now, Ernestine, but respect and admiration. Great Heavens! how these frightful doubts must have tortured you! What an immense amount of courage it must have required to take such an important step alone — to face an ordeal from which even the bravest heart would have shrunk! Ah, I can at least offer you an affection which has been proved as disinterested as it is sincere. Thank God, I have been able to convince you beyond a doubt that you can and should be loved for yourself alone."

"Ah, yes, and it is this fact that makes your affection so precious to me," replied Ernestine, with effusion.

"Herminie is right. Your conduct has been worthy of all praise," said the marquis, who seemed deeply moved. "The few words you let drop on this subject night before last, at the ball, only partially enlightened me in regard to the real facts of the case. You are a noble girl."

But suddenly the duchess, remembering the promise Ernestine had made Olivier, exclaimed anxiously:

"But, Ernestine, — the promise you made M. Olivier yesterday, in my presence!"

"That promise I shall keep," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil, quietly.

CHAPTER XIX.

ERNESTINE'S APPEAL.

On hearing Mlle. de Beaumesnil speak of a promise which she had made to M. Olivier, and which she intended to keep, M. de Maillefort seemed both surprised and uneasy, especially when the duchess repeated:

"What! the promise made to M. Olivier—"

"Yes, this promise, I repeat, I intend to keep, my dear Herminie. Did you not approve my acceptance of M. Olivier's offer? Did you not regard it as a sure guarantee of happiness to come? Did you not appreciate the great generosity of his offer as much as I did?"

"Yes, Ernestine, but it was to the little embroideress that this offer was made."

"Ah, well, why should M. Olivier's generosity seem less great and less noble now, my dear Herminie? Why should not the guarantee of happiness to come be just as certain?"

"I do not know how to answer you, Ernestine. I feel that you are right, and yet I am conscious of a vague uneasiness in spite of myself. But you must have no secrets from M. de Maillefort. You must tell him all."

"I will, and I am sure that M. de Maillefort will approve my decision."

The marquis had been listening silently but thoughtfully.

"Is this M. Olivier the young man who invited you to

dance out of charity, and to whom frequent allusion is made in your journal?"

"Yes, M. de Maillefort."

"And it was M. Olivier's uncle that Ernestine saved from almost certain death the other day," added Herminie.

"His uncle?" exclaimed the hunchback, quickly.

Then, after a moment's reflection, he added:

"I understand. Gratitude, combined with another and more tender sentiment which had its birth at her first meeting with this young man at Madame Herbaut's house, led him to propose to Ernestine when he believed her to be poor and unprotected."

"And a brilliant match it seemed for one of my supposed position," remarked Mlle. de Beaumesnil, "for M. Olivier had just been made an officer, so it was an enviable social position as well as comparative affluence that he offered a penniless and obscure girl who laboured for her daily bread."

"Is his name Olivier Raymond?" exclaimed the hunchback, as if a new idea had suddenly occurred to him.

"That is his name. Do you know him, monsieur?" asked Ernestine.

"Olivier Raymond, formerly a non-commissioned officer of hussars, decorated in Africa, is it not?" continued the marquis.

"The same."

"Then it was for him, though not at his request, nor even with his knowledge, that I requested his promotion the other day in company with my dear young friend, Gerald de Senneterre, who loves the young man like a brother," added the hunchback, thoughtfully.

Then, turning to Ernestine, he continued:

"My child, it is your mother's devoted friend, almost a father, that speaks. All this seems very serious to me, and I tremble lest the natural generosity of your charac-

ter should cause you to go too far. Have you engaged yourself to Olivier Raymond?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"And do you love him?"

"As profoundly as I esteem him, my dear M. de Maillefort."

"I can very well understand, my dear child, why, after the shocking revelations at the ball, night before last, you should have felt the need of sincere and disinterested affection more than ever. I can understand, too, why you should find a wonderful charm, and even see a certain guarantee of future happiness, in M. Olivier Raymond's generous offer, but this should not have prevented you from exercising more prudence. Remember how short your acquaintance with M. Olivier has been!"

"That is true, monsieur, but it did not take me long, when my eyes had once been opened, to realise the fact that your heart was full of the tenderest solicitude for me, and that Herminie was the noblest creature that ever lived, so you may be sure that I am no more deceived in M. Olivier."

"I hope you are right, my child, Heaven knows! This young man is Gerald de Senneterre's most intimate friend, which is a very strong recommendation, I must admit. Besides, before interesting myself in Gerald's protégé, as I feared his affection for a former comrade might have blinded him somewhat, I made numerous inquiries about M. Olivier."

"Well?" exclaimed Ernestine and Herminie, in the same breath.

"Well, the best proof of my satisfaction at the result of these inquiries was the fact that I brought the full force of an influence I rarely exert to bear on M. Olivier's advancement."

"Then why should you feel any apprehensions, M. de Maillefort?" urged Ernestine. "How could I have made

a better choice? M. Olivier's birth is honourable, his profession honoured. He is poor, but am I not, alas! only too rich? And then think of my position as an heiress continually exposed to machinations like those you exposed and punished, night before last! Remember, too, that, in order to protect me from such shameless cupidity, you yourself aroused in me a distrust which has become well-nigh incurable. A prey henceforth to the dreadful thought that I am sought only for my wealth, whom can I trust? Is it strange that, under circumstances like these, I should appreciate disinterestedness and unselfishness? And where could I ever find greater disinterestedness than that of which M. Olivier has given convincing proof? For in the offer that he made me, when he believed me to be poor and unprotected, was it not he who had everything to give?"

There was a half smile on the lips of the marquis as he turned to Herminie and said:

"Your friend, the little embroideress, has quick wit and a ready tongue. There is a good deal of sense and justice in what she says, I must admit, and I should find it very difficult to prove that she is wrong."

"I think so, too," replied Herminie, "for though I have been trying to discover some objections to her keeping her promise, I can find none."

"Nor can I, my dear children," said the hunchback; "but, unfortunately, human reason is not infallible, neither does right always make might; besides, even if this should prove to be a suitable marriage for Ernestine, the consent of her guardian is necessary to this marriage, and with ideas like his, it is not at all likely that he will ever consent to such a union. Ernestine would consequently be obliged to wait several years. Nor is this all. M. Olivier will discover sooner or later that his little embroideress is the richest heiress in France, and from what you have said of him, as well as from what Gerald himself has told me of his friend's

extreme sensitiveness in money matters, there is good reason to fear that M. Olivier will shrink from the possibility of being accused of mercenary motives in wedding so rich an heiress when he himself is poor; so, in spite of his love and gratitude, he may be capable of sacrificing everything to his scruples."

On hearing these words, which she felt were only too true, mademoiselle shuddered. A pang of real anguish pierced her heart, and she exclaimed, bitterly:

"Ah, my accursed wealth! Shall I never escape the torments it causes me!"

Then, in an entreating voice, and gazing at the hunchback with eyes swimming in tears, she added:

"Ah, M. de Maillefort, you were my mother's devoted friend, you love Herminie devotedly,—save me and save her! Come to our assistance. Be our guardian angel, for I feel that my life will be blighted for ever by the suspicions and the distrust you have awakened in my heart. The only chance of happiness left for me is to marry M. Olivier, and Herminie will die of grief if she does not marry M. de Senneterre, so once more I beseech you, my dear M. Maillefort, to take pity on us."

"Oh, Ernestine," cried the duchess, reproachfully, blushing scarlet in her confusion, "that secret was confided to you alone!"

"Gerald!" exclaimed the marquis, in his turn astounded by this revelation. "Gerald! is it possible that you love Gerald?" he continued, with a searching look at Herminie. "Then it was to this irresistible passion that he alluded when I was praising him yesterday for his generous conduct towards Mlle. de Beaumesnil. He told me, then, that he lived only for a young girl who was worthy of his adoration. Yes, I understand everything now, my poor, dear children, and I tremble for your future."

"Forgive me, oh, forgive me, Herminie," pleaded Ernestine, for her friend's tears were flowing fast. "Do

not be angry with me for having betrayed your confidence. But in whom can we have any hope and confidence if not in M. de Maillefort? Who else can guide and comfort and sustain us in these trying hours? Alas! as he himself remarked just now, right does not make might. He admits that, in the trying position in which my accursed wealth places me, I could not have given my affections more wisely, and yet there are great, if not insurmountable, difficulties in the way of my marriage. It is the same with you, Herminie. M. de Maillefort is certainly convinced that there can be no happiness for you and for M. de Senneterre save in your union, which seems even more uncertain than mine."

"Ah, my children, if you knew what kind of a woman the Duchesse de Senneterre is! I told you the other day, Herminie, when you asked me about her. I understand your motive now. But I tell you now, as I told you then, that no woman ever lived who was more absurdly vain of her rank."

"And yet Herminie says she will never marry Gerald unless Madame de Senneterre comes and tells her that she consents to this marriage. This only shows a proper pride in Herminie, though. You think so, too, do you not, M. de Maillefort?"

"She has made that resolve? Ah, what a brave and noble-hearted girl she is!" exclaimed the marquis. "This is still another proof of the laudable pride that makes me love her so much. Most assuredly I approve her decision. I admire it, too, for such a resolve could be born only of a noble soul. I no longer wonder at Gerald's ardent devotion."

"You hear what M. de Maillefort says, Herminie," said Ernestine. "Are you angry with me now for having betrayed your secret?"

"No, Ernestine," replied the duchess, gently. "I blame you only for one thing, and that is for grieving

M. de Maillefort by telling him of misfortunes which he cannot remedy."

"But why may he not be able to remedy them?" retorted Ernestine. "You do not know him. You do not know the great influence he exerts in the world, — how much noble-hearted people love and admire him, and how abjectly afraid cowards and evil-doers are of him. And, then, he is so good, so kind to all who are in trouble; he loved my mother so dearly!"

And as M. de Maillefort, overwhelmed with emotion, averted his face to conceal his tears, Mlle. de Beaumesnil continued, in even more beseeching tones:

"Oh, is it not true that you feel all a father's solicitude for us, M. de Maillefort? Are we not sisters in your eyes, and in the tenderness and attachment we feel for you? Oh, do not, I beseech you, in mercy, do not desert us!"

And Ernestine seized one of the hunchback's hands, while Herminie, involuntarily following her friend's example, possessed herself of the other, saying, in entreating tones:

"Ah, M. de Maillefort, you are our only hope!"

The hunchback was deeply affected. One of these young girls was the child of a woman he had loved devotedly, though secretly, for years.

The other, too, was, perhaps, her child, for very frequently the conviction that Herminie was Madame de Beaumesnil's daughter returned.

But however that might be, M. de Maillefort had received from this dying mother the sacred trust of watching over and protecting Ernestine and Herminie. He had sworn to fulfil this trust, and, unable to make even a pretence of concealing his emotion any longer, he clasped both the young girls passionately to his breast, and, in a voice broken with sobs, exclaimed:

"Yes, yes, my poor, dear children. I will do all the most loving of fathers could do for you!"

It is impossible to describe the touching scene and the eloquent silence that followed, which Ernestine, now radiant with hope, was the first to break, by exclaiming:

"Herminie, we are saved! You will marry M. Gerald, and I, M. Olivier!"

CHAPTER XX.

AN ALLIANCE OFFENSIVE AND DEFENSIVE.

On hearing Ernestine's joyful exclamation, M. de Maillefort shook his head, and said, with a faint smile:

"One moment, young ladies, don't go and indulge in all sorts of wild hopes that will worry me almost as much as your despair. Let us look at the situation calmly and sensibly. All this excitement is not going to help matters; on the contrary, it unnerves one. One weeps and laments, or exults, as the case may be, and that is all it amounts to."

"But, M. de Maillefort, these are tears of happiness," replied Ernestine, wiping her eyes. "I have no reason to regret them."

"No, but they should not be indulged in again. They impair one's vision, and it is necessary to see our situation clearly, very clearly."

"M. de Maillefort is right," said Herminie. "Let us be calm and sensible."

"Yes, yes, we will!" cried Ernestine. "Sit down here between us, M. de Maillefort, and let us talk the matter over calmly and sensibly, as you say."

"Very well," replied the hunchback, seating himself on the sofa between the two girls, and taking a hand of each in his. "Which one of you shall we consider first?"

"Herminie," replied Ernestine, promptly.

"So be it," responded the marquis. "Very well,

Herminie and Gerald love each other devotedly, and are worthy of each other, that is understood; but, with a pride that I both admire and approve, — because there is no possibility of either love or happiness without dignity, — Herminie will not consent to marry Gerald unless the Duchesse de Senneterre calls on her and gives her consent to this marriage. The question is, therefore, to devise a means of compelling this haughtiest of duchesses to make these overtures."

"But nothing is impossible to you, M. de Maillefort," said Ernestine, naïvely.

"Just hear this wheedler with her 'Nothing is impossible to you, M. de Maillefort,'" said the marquis, smiling. Then he added with a sigh: "Ah, my dear child, if you knew what hard things vanity and selfishness are to fight! And those two words describe Madame de Senneterre exactly. But though I am not the great necromancer you say, I shall have to devise some way of taming this two-headed monster, I suppose."

"Ah, if you can ever accomplish that feat, monsieur," said Herminie, "my whole life —"

"I count upon that, my child. Yes, I hope and trust that you will love me during your whole life, even if I should fail in what I am about to undertake, for in that case I believe I should be quite as unhappy as you are, and stand in almost equal need of consolation. Now it is your turn, my dear Ernestine!"

"It seems to me that my prospects are even gloomier than Herminie's," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil, sadly.

"I don't know about that, but I must warn you, my poor child, that I can do nothing for you until after I have satisfied myself beyond a doubt of M. Olivier Raymond's worth."

"Why, doesn't what you already know satisfy you, M. de Maillefort?"

"It is perfectly satisfactory so far as his life as a soldier is concerned, but as a man can be a very brave

officer and a very bad husband, I shall make some further inquiries concerning him."

"But M. de Senneterre speaks very highly of M. Olivier, you say."

"Yes, my dear child, but a man may be an admirable friend and an excellent comrade, and yet make his wife very unhappy."

"How suspicious you are! You forget that M. Olivier thinks me a poor girl — and that — "

"That his gratitude, generosity, and love impelled him to offer you a more brilliant future than one in your supposed position had a right to expect, perhaps. It was a very generous and noble impulse, I admit, and a little while ago I was so touched by it that I allowed myself to become almost as enthusiastic as you and Herminie."

"And has your opinion changed, now?" asked Ernestine, anxiously.

"Now, my child, I judge not only with my heart but with my head; and reason tells me that, though M. Olivier's impulse was highly commendable, it was only an impulse. I do not doubt for an instant that M. Olivier will keep the promise he made you, and that he will act honourably in the matter, but I want to be sure — that is, as sure as one can be of anything in this world — that, in case M. Olivier married you, his whole life would harmonise with the impulse which I admire as much as you do."

Ernestine could not conceal a sort of sorrowful impatience as she listened to these wise and prudent words, and noting this fact, the marquis continued, in a tone that was both grave and affectionate:

"My poor child, the confidence you have in me, the affection I felt for your mother, the very interest I take in your future, all compel me to say this, though it may disappoint and grieve you. But I promise you that, if I find M. Olivier is worthy of you, I will devote myself

body and soul to overcoming the obstacles that stand in the way of your marriage."

"Ernestine, we must trust M. de Maillefort implicitly, blindly," Herminie said to her friend. "The responsibility he assumes is so great, we must not hamper him in any way. Besides, instead of opposing the inquiries he intends to make, you should urge him to make them as searching as possible, for, believe me, they will only prove still more conclusively that M. Olivier is worthy of you."

"That is true, Herminie; and you, M. de Maillefort, will forgive me, I trust," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil. "I was wrong, but, alas! with my only chance of happiness at stake, you can perhaps understand my terror and my wretchedness at the thought that I may lose it."

"On the contrary, it is to make your chance of happiness more certain that I speak as I do. But even supposing that M. Olivier should be found to possess all the attributes we desire, it will, first of all, be necessary to persuade your guardian to consent to this marriage; then, what will prove an even more difficult task, I fear, we shall have to convince M. Olivier that he can, with honour, marry the richest heiress in France, inasmuch as he loved her when he thought her penniless and unprotected."

"In this, alas! I agree with you, M. de Maillefort," said Ernestine, despondently. "I, too, am afraid that M. Olivier will refuse to marry me. And yet this refusal would show such nobility of soul that, even though it made me miserable, I could not help admiring it. Alas, alas! what are we to do, M. de Maillefort?"

"I do not know, my dear child. I will think the matter over to-night, and try to devise some means of accomplishing our object. I have a vague, shadowy idea of one expedient," added the hunchback, thoughtfully. "Yes, why not? But I must reduce this chaotic mass

of ideas to a little order first, and, above all, don't let us give way to despair."

"Do you think Ernestine might see M. Olivier again soon?" inquired Herminie.

"Not for several days."

"Oh, dear, what will he think of me?" sighed Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

"So far as that is concerned, Ernestine, you remember you told him that the relative with whom you were living was so peculiar that you would need several days to decide whether it had better be M. Olivier or Commander Bernard who should go to her to ask your hand in marriage."

"That is true."

"And this pretended relative is your governess, I suppose, my dear child?" said the marquis.

"Yes, monsieur."

"Can you rely upon her discretion?"

"Self-interest ensures that."

"That is a very important point, for there can be little or no chance of success in our undertaking without absolute secrecy," remarked the hunchback; "and I need not say, my dear Herminie, that even Gerald himself must not know that the little embroideress, about whom M. Olivier has often talked to him, is Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"Alas! monsieur, it will be an easy matter for me to promise that, for I shall not see Gerald again until his mother comes to me, or, in other words, I shall never see him again."

"Courage, my child, courage!" said the hunchback. "I am not a very devout man, but I do believe in the God of good people, and that virtue is rewarded, even in this world. Courage, then! But to return to the subject of M. Olivier; my dear Herminie, if you see him, as you probably will, you must tell him that Ernestine is not very well. This will give me time to form my plans,

for I only ask that you will give me one week, my dear children. If I have not brought these matters to a successful termination in one week, I never shall. Then it will be time to think of resignation and consolation, and you, my children, must admit, I think, that if you are obliged to give up all idea of these much desired marriages, your grief and disappointment will be much more endurable if you are together, than alone. Besides, I shall be left to you, and we three, together, can surely make a brave stand against misfortune."

"Ah, if I had to endure such a sorrow, deprived of Ernestine's friendship and yours, I believe it would kill me," murmured Herminie.

"Alas! my dear Herminie, how fraught with fears and anxiety this coming week will be!" exclaimed Ernestine. "But we shall at least see each other every day, shall we not? Or what is far better," exclaimed Mlle. de Beaumesnil, starting violently as a new idea suddenly occurred to her, "we need not be separated any more."

"What do you mean, Ernestine?"

"You must stay here with me from now on. Must she not, M. de Maillefort?"

"It would be a great happiness for me," answered Herminie, blushing, "but I cannot accept it."

The hunchback understood Herminie's feelings. She felt that it would be humiliating to accept an idle and luxurious life from the rich heiress; besides, Ernestine's proposal, even if it were accepted by the duchess, might injure M. de Maillefort's plans, and he said as much to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, who was as greatly surprised as chagrined by her friend's refusal.

"I think it might seriously interfere with my plans, my dear child, if your guardian and his family should discover your fondness for Herminie, for they would immediately institute an inquiry into the cause of this sudden intimacy with the young girl you had apparently met to-day for the first time, and the suspicious

distrusts thus aroused might give me a great deal of trouble."

"We shall be obliged to resign ourselves to a separation, then, I suppose," said Ernestine, sadly; "but it would have been such a comfort to spend this week of anxiety and suspense with Herminie."

"I share your regret, Ernestine," said the duchess, "but M. de Maillefort knows what will further our interests better than we do; besides, my sudden disappearance would, perhaps, arouse M. Olivier's suspicions. It would be utterly impossible to give him any news of you, and last, but not least, my dear Ernestine, it will not do to forget that I support myself by my music lessons, and I could not remain idle for a whole week."

For an instant, Mlle. de Beaumesnil gazed at the duchess in a sort of bewilderment, not understanding how Herminie could think of working for her living now she had the richest heiress in France for an intimate friend; but remembering the young musician's delicacy and pride, Mlle. de Beaumesnil shuddered at the thought that she had, perhaps, been in danger of alienating her friend for ever by her thoughtless, though kindly meant proposal.

"True, my dear Herminie, I forgot all about your lessons," she replied. "You must not miss them, of course; but you will at least number me among your favourite pupils, and not let a day pass without coming. Won't you promise me that?"

"Oh, yes," replied Herminie, greatly relieved, for, as Ernestine had suspected, the duchess had trembled lest her friend should insist upon her acceptance of a hospitality which she regarded as humiliating.

"And now we can only hope that fate will prove propitious, my children," said the marquis, rising. "As for your manner towards your guardian, my dear Ernestine, let it be slightly cold and reserved. Remain in your own room as much as possible, but do not manifest

any very bitter resentment towards these people. A quarrel might injure us deeply. Later we will see."

"By the way, M. de Maillefort," said Ernestine, "I think it might be well to inform you that Madame de la Rochaiguë, who is still under the impression that I intend to marry M. Gerald, wanted me to promise that I would see Madame de Senneterre to-morrow, but I asked for a few days for reflection."

"You did wisely, my child, but to-morrow you must formally announce to Madame de la Rochaiguë that you have decided not to marry Gerald. You need not give any explanation whatever. I will attend to the rest."

"I will follow your advice, monsieur. To-morrow, Herminie, I will make you both proud and happy by telling you how nobly and frankly M. de Senneterre behaved towards me. Did he not, M. de Maillefort?"

"His conduct was admirable. Gerald warned me in advance of his plan, and he kept his promise. But now you girls will be obliged to separate for awhile."

"Already!" cried Ernestine. "Let me at least keep Herminie until evening, M. de Maillefort."

"I can not remain any longer, unfortunately, Ernestine," said the duchess, trying to smile. "At five o'clock I have to give a lesson at the house of a M. Bouffard, whom M. de Maillefort knows, and I am obliged to be very punctual."

"I must submit then, I suppose," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil, with a sigh, thinking what a drawback Herminie's occupation was to the pleasures of life; "but you will at least promise to come and see me to-morrow, will you not, Herminie?"

"Yes, yes," replied the duchess. "I shall await the morrow with quite as much impatience as you will, I assure you."

"Herminie," asked Mlle. de Beaumesnil, suddenly, "do you love me as much as when you believed me to be Ernestine, the little embroideress?"

"I love you even more, perhaps," replied the duchess, earnestly, "for Mlle. de Beaumesnil has retained the heart of Ernestine, the little embroideress."

The two girls embraced each other affectionately once again and then separated.

CHAPTER XXI.

"DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND."

Two days after this conversation with Herminie and Ernestine, M. de Maillefort, after two long and serious consultations with Gerald, wrote to the Duchesse de Senneterre, asking her to see him that afternoon, and, his request being granted, the marquis presented himself at the appointed hour.

The marquis, warned by Gerald, was not surprised at the expression of bitter anger and chagrin on the face of Madame de Senneterre, for that very morning Madame de la Rochaiguë had informed the duchess that Mlle. de Beaumesnil, though she liked and admired M. de Senneterre very much, had no intention of marrying him.

At the sight of the hunchback, Madame de Senneterre's wrath blazed up still more fiercely, and she exclaimed, bitterly:

"You must confess, monsieur, that I am wonderfully generous!"

"In what way?"

"Am I not giving you the pleasure of coming to exult over the misery you have caused?"

"To what misery do you allude?"

"What misery?" exclaimed the duchess, wrathfully. "Is it not your fault that my son's marriage with Mlle. de Beaumesnil is broken off?"

"My fault?"

"Oh, I am not your dupe, monsieur, and it is to assure you of that fact that I consented to the interview you

had the audacity to ask of me. I did not want to miss this opportunity to tell you face to face how much I hate and despise you."

"So be it, madame. It affords just as good a topic of conversation as any other, and you excel in this kind of discourse, I believe."

"M. de Maillefort will oblige me by reserving his insulting irony for some other occasion," retorted Madame de Senneterre, haughtily. "He would also do well to remember that he has the honour of speaking to the Duchesse de Senneterre."

"Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre will do me the honour to treat me with the consideration due me," replied the hunchback, sternly; "if not, I shall govern my words exactly by Madame de Senneterre's."

"Is that intended as a threat, monsieur?"

"As a lesson, madame."

"A lesson, to me?"

"And why not, may I ask? What, I who was your husband's oldest and most trusted friend, I who love Gerald as a son, I who have a right to the respect and esteem of every one, — do you understand, madame? to the respect of every one, — I whose birth is at least equal to yours (it is well to remind you of that, as you attach such an absurd importance to such trifles), I am to be greeted with insulting words and eyes flashing with anger; and yet I am not to remind you of what you owe to me and what you owe to yourself?"

Like all vain and arrogant persons who are not accustomed to the slightest contradiction, Madame de Senneterre was at first surprised and irritated, but afterwards, awed by this stern and sensible language, her anger giving place to a profound despondency, she replied:

"Ah, monsieur, you should at least make some allowance for the despair a mother naturally feels on seeing her son ruined for ever."

"Ruined?"

"Yes, and through you."

"Will you have the goodness to prove that?"

"I have heard of the wonderful influence you have recently acquired over Mlle. de Beaumesnil. My son, too, has more confidence in you than he has in his mother, and if you had been favourably disposed, this marriage, which had been virtually decided upon, would not have been suddenly broken off for no apparent reason. Yes, there is a mystery about all this which you only can solve. And when I think that Gerald, with his illustrious name, might be the richest landed proprietor in France, but for you, I am, — well, yes, I am, — the most wretched of women and mothers, and I positively weep with rage and chagrin, as you see, monsieur. You are satisfied now, are you not?"

For the proud Duchesse de Senneterre was indeed weeping bitterly.

Had it not been for the deep interest he felt in Gerald and Herminie, M. de Maillefort, not in the least affected by these absurd tears, would have turned his back on this haughty and avaricious woman, who naïvely believed herself the tenderest and most unfortunate of mothers simply because she had left no means untried to secure her son an immense fortune and because this scheme of hers had failed; but desiring above all things to ensure the successful termination of the undertaking entrusted to him, the marquis allowed this ebullition of grief, which did not touch him in the least, to pass unnoticed.

"The mystery you speak of is very simple, it seems to me. Gerald and Mlle. de Beaumesnil like and appreciate each other, but are not the least bit in love, that is all."

"What has love to do with the matter? Are there not plenty of marriages, besides those in royal families, made without love?"

"You must know that I have not requested an important interview with you merely to discuss a question which has been a matter of contention ever since the

world began, viz., which is better, a marriage of convenience or a love match. We should never come to any agreement; besides, we have to deal with an accomplished fact: Gerald's marriage with Mlle. de Beaumesnil is now an impossibility, and you may as well make the best of it. That young lady's millions will never belong to your son, who, fine fellow that he is, cares nothing whatever about them."

"Yes, and thanks to such idiotic disinterestedness, or rather such shameful indifference to enhancing the splendour of their name, the scions of our most illustrious houses are lapsing into a disgraceful mediocrity. It was for this very reason that my father and my husband — by neglecting the means of reëstablishing the fortune of which that infamous revolution stripped us — left my son and my daughters almost penniless. In the present condition of affairs, I have little chance of marrying off my daughters, while Gerald, if he were rich, could help his sisters pecuniarily, and they would thus be able to secure eligible *partis*. And you wonder that I am overwhelmed with despair at the ruin of my plans, — at the destruction of my hope of securing for my son a fortune suited to his rank!"

"I suppose that you love Gerald after your fashion. It is not a very commendable fashion, still you do love him, I suppose."

"Yes, I do love him — I love him as I ought to love him, too."

"We will see about that."

"What do you mean, monsieur?"

"In the first place, it is my duty to tell you that Gerald is deeply in love, and that — "

Madame de Senneterre sprang up out of her armchair, fairly purple with anger, and, interrupting the hunchback, exclaimed, vehemently:

"It is outrageous! I have suspected it all along! The mystery is cleared up now. It is my son who has

refused, for that little Beaumesnil was wild about him. I could see that at the ball, and it is you, you, monsieur, who have had a hand in this abominable intrigue. I will never see my son again. He has no heart, no soul!"

The marquis had anticipated this explosion, and, without taking the slightest notice of it, continued:

"You interrupted me, madame. I was about to say that Mlle. de Beaumesnil, far from being in love with Gerald, entertains a very ardent affection for another man."

"The bold-faced hussy!" exclaimed the duchess with such naïveté that the marquis could not help smiling slightly, in spite of his anxiety.

"I also feel it my duty to inform you, madame, that Gerald is in love with a young girl who is in every respect worthy of his love."

"I beg, monsieur, that you will not say another word to me on the subject," said Madame de Senneterre, feigning a calmness which the trembling of her voice grievously belied. "All is ended between my son and me. He can love whom he pleases and marry whom he pleases, as he is old enough to dispense with my consent. Let him drag his name through the mire if he likes. From this day I shall resume my maiden name, and I shall proclaim high and low and everywhere why I blush to bear a name so dishonoured and degraded. It is to be hoped that I shall, at least, find some consolation in my daughters."

To these senseless ravings the marquis replied, quietly and gravely:

"Your son understands his duty towards you very differently from what you understand yours towards him. He will not even make the formal request for parental consent on the part of a person who is of legal age, which is usual in such cases. He will both honour and respect your wishes to this extent: he will not marry without your consent."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, with a sardonic laugh. "He really does me this honour?"

"And, in spite of the profound love she cherishes for him, the young lady he loves will consent to marry him only upon one condition: that you, madame, go and tell this young lady that you consent to her marriage with your son."

"This, M. de Maillefort, must be only a jest."

"It is a matter of life or death for your son, madame."

The voice of the marquis and the expression of his face were so full of earnestness and authority, that Madame de Senneterre, impressed in spite of herself. cried in alarm:

"What do you mean, monsieur?"

"I mean that you must be a hard-hearted mother if you have not noticed your son's pallor and almost prostrated condition for several days past. On the day of the ball at which your son behaved so nobly, did not your physician tell you that, but for the heroic treatment to which he had resorted, you would have been in great danger of losing your son by brain fever?"

Gradually recovering from her alarm, and regretting that she had allowed herself to display even a momentary solicitude, Madame de Senneterre retorted, disdainfully:

"Nonsense! A brain fever can be cured by a few bleedings, monsieur, and one dies of love only in novels, and in very poor novels."

"That is a kind and motherly remark, madame, and to keep it company I will say to you, with equal coolness, that if, after you have had time to make proper inquiries and obtain all needful information concerning the young lady of whom I have spoken, you do not take the step expected of you —"

"Well, monsieur?"

"Well, madame, your son will kill himself —"

"Yes, as the disappointed lover does in all the thrill-

ing melodramas," retorted Madame de Senneterre, with an even shriller laugh.

"I tell you that your son will kill himself, you poor fool!" exclaimed the marquis, terrible in his earnestness. "I tell you the last Duc de Senneterre will perish by his own hand like the last Duc de Bretigny!"

This allusion to a recent tragical event, which had been one of the chief topics of conversation at Madame de Mirecourt's ball, gave the duchess a severe shock. She knew Gerald's remarkable energy and determination of character, and consequently knew how much he must suffer from this hidden grief; besides, she had such a profound respect for M. de Maillefort, much as she disliked him personally, that she knew he would be incapable of threatening her with the possibility of Gerald's suicide if he was not really convinced that such a danger was imminent, so the now thoroughly frightened woman cried:

"What you say is terrible, monsieur. The house of De Senneterre become extinct by a suicide!"

The blind pride of race spoke more loudly than maternal love in this cry.

The proud woman shuddered first chiefly at the thought that the name of the Senneterres, of that great and illustrious house, might become extinct through an act that the society in which she moved considered a crime.

The marquis understood Madame de Senneterre's real feelings so well that he exclaimed:

"Yes; if you are as blind as you are pitiless, this illustrious name of Senneterre, often famous and always honoured, will be blotted out for ever in tears and in blood."

"M. de Maillefort, such an idea is horrible! I know my son is capable of going to almost any extreme — but no, no, I will not believe that. You make me shudder! And when I think of the grief and despair and shame of

a family that sees its head end his life by his own rash act — hold — enough — enough — I should go mad!"

And passing her hand hastily across her brow, covered with big drops of cold sweat, Madame de Senneterre continued:

"I tell you, monsieur, that I cannot and will not think of such a thing. But who is this young woman you speak of? Though I am in mortal dread as to the choice Gerald has made, there is one thing that reassures me a little. It is that the young woman insists that I shall come and tell her that I consent to her marriage with my son. For her to dare expect such a concession from me, she must hold such a social position that I, at least, have no cause to fear an unworthy love on the part of my son."

"Gerald has placed his affections creditably, even nobly, madame. I have already had the honour of assuring you of this fact," responded the marquis, severely, "and usually what I say can be believed."

"That is true, monsieur. Your assurance should satisfy me on that point. It is not likely that I shall ever have another opportunity to make such a match as that which I dreamed of for my son; but if the birth and fortune of the young lady in question are satisfactory, and — "

But here the hunchback interrupted Madame de Senneterre by saying:

"The young lady in question is an orphan. She is a music teacher, and supports herself by giving lessons."

It is impossible to describe the expression of Madame de Senneterre's face as the words of the marquis fell upon her ear. Had she experienced an electric shock, the movement she made could not have been more convulsive.

"An adventuress, then! The wretched boy, to degrade himself like this!" she cried. "What a humiliation for me and my daughters!"

And as M. de Maillefort sprang up no less hastily to

reply to Madame de Senneterre, the latter interrupted him by adding:

"And such a creature has the audacity to ask me — me to so degrade myself as to go to her, the —"

But Madame de Senneterre did not complete the sentence. She had fully intended to add an opprobrious epithet, but she burst into a shrill, almost frenzied, laugh instead.

A cold silence following this ebullition of rage, Madame de Senneterre placed a trembling hand on M. de Maillefort's arm, and said:

"My dear marquis, listen to me. If my unworthy son should come and stand there, — right before me, do you understand? — and say to me, 'I will kill myself before your very eyes if you refuse your consent,' I should say, 'Kill yourself, then. I would rather see you dead than disgraced. I would rather your name should die out, than to see it perpetuated to your dishonour, mine, and that of your sisters.'"

Then seeing the marquis was about to protest, she added:

"M. de Maillefort, I am not in a passion, I am calm, and I am saying exactly what I mean. I am telling you exactly what I should do, and after the insulting demand of my son and his accomplice, it is no longer maternal love or even indifference I feel for him; it is contempt, it is hatred, yes, hatred, do you hear? Tell him so. All the affection I once felt for this scoundrel I shall now bestow upon my daughters."

"This woman would do what she says," thought the marquis, with a feeling of horror. "It is useless to insist further. Reason is no match for such blind obstinacy as this. This woman, as she says, would watch her son kill himself before her very eyes unmoved. This is a pride of race that amounts to the stupid ferocity of the brute. Poor Gerald! Poor Herminie!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A FINAL VICTORY.

AFTER a moment's silence, during which Madame de Senneterre sat positively panting with rage at this odious revelation which she could not yet fully make up her mind to believe, viz., that her son wished to marry a music teacher who supported herself by her own exertions, M. de Maillefort said, coldly, and exactly as if the foregoing conversation had never taken place:

"Madame, what do you think of the nobility and illustriousness of the house of Haut-Martel?"

At first Madame de Senneterre gazed at the hunchback with evident surprise, then she said:

"Really, monsieur, this question is most extraordinary."

"And why, madame?"

"What, monsieur, you see me crushed under the blow that has just struck me, or, rather, that you have just dealt me, unintentionally, no doubt," she added, with bitter irony, "and then ask me without rhyme or reason what I think of the illustriousness of the house of Haut-Martel."

"My question is less extraordinary, as you do not seem to think there can be the slightest ameliorating circumstance in the blow that has just overtaken you. So once more I ask, what do you think of the house of Haut-Martel?"

"There is not an older or more illustrious family in

France, you must know very well, as you are closely connected with it on your father's side."

"I am now the head of that house, madame."

"You?" exclaimed Madame de Senneterre.

And strange to say the lady's acerbity of manner gave place to a sort of envious deference for the new representative of this powerful family.

"But I thought that the Prince Duc de Haut-Martel, who has resided on his estates in Germany since that idiotic revolution of 1830 —"

"That Prince Duc de Haut-Martel is dead, madame, and as he had neither brothers nor children, and as I am his cousin-germain, I inherit his estates and title."

"Then this event must have occurred very recently."

"I received the first intimation of it through the Austrian ambassador, and last night I had an official confirmation of the fact."

"So you are now the Marquis de Maillefort, Prince Duc de Haut-Martel?" said Madame de Senneterre, with mingled admiration and envy.

"Precisely, and without troubling myself very much about it, as you see."

"But your position is magnificent," exclaimed this monomaniac, quite forgetting the son whose despair might end in suicide. "Why, you are now one of the greatest noblemen in France."

"Good Heavens! yes. My newly acquired dignities enable me to aspire to anything, do they not? And to think that only yesterday I was but a simple marquis! What a change to-day, is there not? Don't you find my hump a little smaller since you have heard that I am so great a nobleman?"

"One should no more sneer at rank than at religion, monsieur."

"Certainly not. There are plenty of other subjects for ridicule. But I forgot to tell you that the Prince Duc de Haut-Martel left me estates in Hungary which yield

a yearly income of about fifty thousand crowns, free of all incumbrances."

"One hundred and fifty thousand francs! Why, though no one knows the exact amount of your fortune, you are supposed to be very rich already, monsieur," replied Madame de Senneterre, with a sort of jealous envy.

"I scarcely know the exact amount of my income, myself," said the hunchback, "for my tenants, poor souls! pay me only when they can do so without too great an effort; but even in the worst of times I can generally count upon at least sixty thousand francs a year, to say nothing of the fact — of course, this is little more than an empty honour — that the electors of the arrondissement in which my estates are located propose to do me the honour of making me their deputy, their former representative having recently died; so you see that wealth and honours are falling upon me thick as hail."

"Then you have an income of more than two hundred thousand francs, and are Prince Duc de Haut-Martel and — "

"Prospective deputy, besides. Don't forget that."

"Your position is certainly a very enviable one."

"Yes, and with my figure and appearance I can aspire to the most beautiful woman in the land, can I not? Say, what a pity it is that Mlle. de Beaumesnil is in love with a handsome young man! But for that, I might have married her myself."

A new thought suddenly occurred to Madame de Senneterre, and after a moment's reflection the avaricious creature, casting a keen glance at M. de Maillefort, said:

"I think I understand you, M. le marquis."

"Let me see if you do."

"The question you asked me just now as to what I thought of the house of Haut-Martel was intended to

suggest a sort of compensation for the terrible disappointment my unworthy son has caused me."

"You are right, madame."

"And as you have unexpectedly become the head of an illustrious house, you do not want it to become extinct."

"There is some truth in that, also," replied the hunchback, not a little surprised at Madame de Senneterre's penetration, though he was far from suspecting the lady's real thought.

"Yes, I admit that I would not like the name to die out, madame," he added, after a slight pause.

"And as you know that only a carefully reared girl of noble birth would be capable of bearing this noble name as it should be borne, and of understanding the sacred obligations she would have to fulfil towards the man to whom she owed such a magnificent position, you are thinking of my eldest daughter, — and believe you can thus offer me an adequate compensation for the misery my son's insubordination has caused me."

"I! marry?" exclaimed the hunchback, even more revolted than surprised by Madame de Senneterre's heartless proposal.

But anxious to see how far the blindness, hardness of heart, and love of greed would carry this cruel parent, he responded with one of those half way refusals that seem to be made only in the hope of seeing them overcome.

"I think of such a marriage! Besides, even if I did, would there be any possibility of compassing it? Think of it, madame, at my age and deformed as I am, while your daughter Bertha is a charming girl of barely twenty. She would laugh in my face and she would do perfectly right."

"You are mistaken, monsieur," replied this incomparable parent, gravely. "In the first place, Mlle. de Senneterre has been reared in habits of respect and submission from which I feel sure she will never depart.

Besides, she knows that she is poor, and that she would never be likely to attain another position to be compared with that you offer her."

"But again let me remind you that I am old and ugly and a hunchback besides."

"M. le marquis, my daughters have been brought up in such a way that they would not dare to so much as look at the husband I select for them until the marriage ceremony is over."

"A pleasant surprise you would give the poor child that married me!"

"I repeat, M. le marquis, that my daughters have not those lewd imaginations that are capable only of a carnal appreciation of a husband. If I tell my daughter my wishes, that will suffice."

"I am strongly inclined to tell this heartless, unscrupulous woman what I think of her," the hunchback said to himself; "but what should I gain by it? She is an egregious fool, and there is nothing for me to do but answer the fool according to her folly."

So seeing that Madame de Senneterre was awaiting his reply with keen anxiety, the marquis said:

"You said a few minutes ago, and very sensibly, I think, that one should no more speak lightly of rank than of religion, did you not?"

"Yes, M. le marquis."

"You will admit, too, probably, that it is equally wrong to treat marriage lightly."

"Certainly, M. le marquis."

"Then allow me to say that your desire to see your daughter Bertha Princesse de Haut-Martel would result in nothing more or less than a cruel mockery of religion, nobility of rank, and marriage, — three sacred things, as you call them."

"How is that, monsieur?"

"Mlle. de Senneterre would outrage all the laws of marriage and religion, or rather of nature and the

Creator, which is even worse, by pledging love and fidelity to an old hunchback like me; and I, in turn, would bring disgrace and ridicule upon the nobility in general, and upon the houses of Senneterre and Haut-Martel in particular, by running any risk of perpetuating their illustrious line with a set of hideous little hunchbacks made in my image. They might serve as convincing proof of my wife's resignation and faithfulness, but they would certainly give the world a droll opinion of our great historic races."

"Really, M. le marquis — I — "

"You are going to cite Prince Eugène, possibly, as an example for me, and I ought, perhaps, to feel greatly flattered by the comparison, but it would not be well to impair the lustre of such rarities by multiplying them. I am extremely grateful to you for your kind offer, and Mlle. Bertha, believe me, will be equally grateful to me for having declined it. It depends entirely upon you, however, whether a union of our two powerful houses is realised or not, and also whether this income of two hundred thousand francs is allowed to go out of your family. I make haste to assure you that I am too thoroughly convinced of my own unworthiness to venture to lift my eyes to you, madame la duchesse," added the hunchback, with a low, though decidedly ironical bow. "In the first place I should make you the most detestable husband in the world, and then I have no inclination for marriage."

"It is hardly necessary to decline with such alacrity a proposition that has never been made to you," replied the Duchesse de Senneterre, rather spitefully. "You would oblige me by explaining yourself more clearly, however, for I never was good at solving enigmas. You are kind enough to speak of a union of our two houses, and of preventing your fortune from going out of my family, but I haven't the slightest idea how you propose to bring these things about."

"First permit me to say — not at all by way of reproach, understand — that you were not so very difficult to please in regard to lineage when Gerald's marriage with Mlle. de Beaumesnil was under consideration. Beaumesnil is not an aristocratic name by any means, — the grandfather of the late count, though a highly respected man, was simply M. Joseph Vert-Puis, a very wealthy banker."

"I know perfectly well that Mlle. Vert-Puis de Beaumesnil is a mere nobody, so far as birth is concerned, but —"

"But the numerous millions gild this recently ennobled plebeian, do they not? Very well, though that number of millions may have to be divided by four or five, what would you say to a notice couched in the following terms:

"M. le Marquis de Maillefort, Prince Duc de Haut-Martel, etc., etc., has the honour to inform you of the marriage of Mlle. Herminie de Haut-Martel, with M. le Duc de Senneterre."

Madame de Senneterre, surprised beyond expression, gazed wonderingly at the hunchback, who continued:

"The marriage contract stipulates that all male children that may be born of this marriage shall take the name of Senneterre-Haut-Martel, which I fancy will sound quite as well as Noailles-Noailles, Rohan-Rochefort, or Montmorency-Luxembourg, and as Mlle. Herminie Haut-Martel is an only child, and I am very frugal in my tastes, the young couple will have, up to the time of my death, one hundred and fifty thousand francs a year to sustain their exalted rank in a suitable manner."

"I really do not understand you at all, M. de Maillefort. You have never been married, and you have no daughter."

"No, but what is there to prevent me from adopting one, and thus giving her my name and fortune?"

"Nothing, of course. But who are the parents of this girl you contemplate adopting?"

"She is an orphan, and, as I told you before, she is a music teacher, and supports herself by giving lessons."

"What!" exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, "that same creature Gerald is crazy about?"

"Enough, madame," said the marquis, sternly. "I will not permit any one to speak in that way in my presence of a young lady whom I love and esteem sufficiently to give her my name."

"But what you say is so strange —"

"Strange or not, do you accept my proposal, yes or no?"

"Accept — monsieur? Accept for a daughter-in-law — a — a person who has given music lessons for a living?"

"Such sensitiveness on your part is truly heroic, doubtless, but I must call your attention to the fact that your son has little or nothing, and that Mlle. Herminie de Maillefort, though she has done such a scandalous thing as to earn an honest living, would bring M. de Senneterre two hundred thousand francs a year, and an alliance with the Haut-Martel family. I also take the liberty of reminding you that your son will probably kill himself if he does not marry this young lady. I know you would rather see him dead than married to some one beneath him, for the mother of the Gracchi is not to be compared with you, so far as stoicism is concerned, but it is none the less certain that the extinction of the house of Senneterre in such a fashion would cause a frightful scandal, which would, I think, be even worse than a *mésalliance*, especially when a Senneterre makes a *mésalliance* with a Maillefort de Haut-Martel."

"But, monsieur, every one will know that this young person is only your adopted child."

"All I can say in reply to that objection, madame, is

that I, myself, could never have had so beautiful, so affectionate, and so truly noble a child."

"You know her well, then?"

"You certainly ask a singular question, madame. What! can you believe that I — being the man you know me to be — would give my name to a person who would not be an honour to that name?"

"But, monsieur," exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, in a tone of sorrowful reproach, "there can be no denying the fact that your adopted daughter has been a — a professional artiste."

"My adopted daughter, will, indeed, have the terrible misfortune to be and to have been a musical artiste of a high order. This is truly deplorable. I weep — I mourn — I bewail the fact. But, alas! you know the proverb, 'The prettiest girl in the world has some fault.'"

"And her patrons, do they belong to our set?"

"No, she is too proud for that."

"*Mon Dieu!* marquis, you place me in a very embarrassing position."

"I shall be able to put an end to this perplexity, I think. Listen attentively," continued M. de Maillefort, no longer in an ironical manner, but in firm, even stern tones. "I tell you plainly, once for all, that, if you refuse your consent, I shall go straight to Herminie, tell her exactly what I intend to do for her, and prove to her that though, as a nameless and penniless girl, her dignity demanded the advances she asked from you, lest it might be said that she had forced herself upon the Senneterre family from ambitious or mercenary motives, as the adopted child of M. de Maillefort, who brings an illustrious name and a fortune of two hundred thousand francs a year to her husband, she need feel no such scruples. As Herminie adores Gerald, and my reasoning is perfectly just and sensible, I think, in fact I am sure, that she will be guided by me. Your son will

make the usual formal application for your consent, and then there is nothing more to be said."

"Monsieur —"

"It will pain Gerald a good deal, I am sure, to have to dispense with your consent, for he loves you — blindly — that is the proper word to use in this connection; but in order to spare him all remorse, I shall repeat your words to him, madame: 'I had rather see him dead, than married to one beneath him.' Atrocious, or, rather, senseless words, when I, myself, assured you that Gerald could not find a wife more worthy of him than the one he has chosen!"

"You surely would not create discord between my son and me, monsieur."

"I shall certainly do everything in my power to ensure Gerald's peace of mind and happiness, since you are so stubborn and opinionated as to be willing to sacrifice both to your absurd prejudices —"

"That expression, monsieur —"

"These prejudices are not only absurd, madame, but after the adoption I propose, there is no longer even an excuse for them. One word more. If you have the good sense to prefer to live in peace and on affectionate terms with your son, and spare yourself, as well as him, a most deplorable scandal, you will go to Herminie's home to-morrow — any further inquiries being entirely unnecessary after what I have told you about her."

"I — monsieur — I, go first to the home of this young person?"

"You will be obliged to degrade yourself to that extent, the degradation being the more terrible, as Herminie, for certain reasons, must remain ignorant of my intention of adopting her until after your visit. So it will be to Mlle. Herminie, the poor music teacher, that you will go to give your consent to her marriage with your son."

"Never, monsieur, never will I so lower myself as to do this thing."

"But remember that there is nothing really humiliating about this step, and that no one will witness it but me, for I shall be there at the time."

"I tell you that it is impossible, monsieur. Never will I subject myself to such a humiliation."

"Then, instead of making your son adore you by consenting to a thing you cannot prevent, Gerald will know exactly what your affection is worth, and dispense with your consent entirely."

"But you cannot expect me to come to such an important decision in a moment, as it were."

"So be it, madame. I will give you until to-morrow noon. I will call then to hear your decision, and, if it conforms alike to the dictates of common sense and maternal love, I will precede you by a few moments to Herminie's home, in order that I may be there when you arrive. If you do not agree to this, I declare to you that your son will be married in less than six weeks."

Having said this, the marquis bowed low to Madame de Senneterre, and walked straight out of the room.

"I am satisfied that the egregious simpleton will do what I ask," he said to himself, "for her ambition and her avarice will both be so thoroughly gratified by this marriage that she will forget that objectionable feature, — the adoption. Besides, by one of those strange contradictions we so often see in poor, frail human nature, this woman, who in her obstinacy would drive her son to suicide, is as jealous of his affection as if she were the tenderest and most devoted of mothers; and, understanding how Gerald will adore her if she pretends to give a free consent to his marriage, she will go to Herminie, I am sure of it.

"But, alas! the game is only half won so far as I am concerned," mused the hunchback. "Will Herminie, who is so proud, consent to become my adopted child, when

she knows the advantages which this adoption will give her, and which alone decided Madame de Senneterre to take the initiative? I am very much afraid that she will not. Did I not see how uncomfortable she felt when Ernestine insisted, not that she should share her wealth, but merely give up her lessons and remain with her? And yet, she perhaps knows that Ernestine is her sister, for I can doubt it no longer, — Herminie is, and knows she is, the daughter of Madame de Beaumesnil.

"Under these circumstances will Herminie, proud and sensitive as she is, accept my offer? I am by no means certain of it, though I told Gerald's mother so in order to frighten her. That, too, is the reason I desired that the marriage should be definitely arranged before I broached the subject of adoption at all. But I found that could not be managed. Madame de Senneterre would have seen her son kill himself in her presence rather than consent to a *mésalliance* with a poor girl without name or fortune. All I have been able to do is, perhaps, to induce Madame de Senneterre to make the desired advances to Herminie, — the poor orphan and music teacher. Afterwards we will see.

"I shall now go straight to M. de la Rochaiguë. Having done all I can for Herminie, I must now see what I can do for Ernestine. I shall have to take the baron unawares, for, in his exasperation against me as the fell destroyer of his hopes of a seat in the Senate, he will refuse to see me, but, with Ernestine's aid, I shall be able to surprise him, I think, and, fortunately for my plans, he is much more stupid than wicked."

And M. de Maillefort, reëntering his carriage, was driven to M. de la Rochaiguë's house.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A TEMPTING BAIT.

M. DE MAILLEFORT, having asked to see Mlle. de Beaumesnil, was conducted straight to Ernestine's apartments.

"Have you some good news for Herminie?" cried Ernestine, hastening forward to meet him.

"A little, I think."

"How glad I am! Can I tell Herminie when I see her what you have just told me?"

"Yes; tell her to hope, and yet not to expect too much. And now, as you seem to have forgotten all about yourself, I will add that the result of my inquiries concerning M. Olivier has been eminently satisfactory."

"I was sure it would be."

"I even discovered one rather strange fact. It is that, while he was working during his leave so he might be able to assist his uncle, he went down to Beaumesnil, your estate near Luzarches, to help a contractor with his estimates there."

"M. Olivier? That was, indeed, strange."

"And this circumstance suggested a plan which I think may prove a good one, for now I think, with you, that you could not have made a wiser choice, but —"

"But what?"

"It is such an important matter that I have thought one more test might be advisable. What is your opinion on the subject?"

"Try it; I have no fears."

"Besides, you shall witness it yourself, my dear child.

If M. Olivier withstands it, you will be the proudest and happiest of women, and there can be no further doubt of your future happiness. If, on the contrary, he succumbs, it will, alas! only be a fresh proof that the noblest natures sometimes yield to certain temptations. This test, too, will have another and very important result."

"And what is that?"

"After this test M. Olivier can not feel the slightest scruples about marrying the richest heiress in France, and you know, my dear child, that you have some very grave apprehensions on that score."

"Ah, monsieur, you are, indeed, our good angel!"

"Wait a little, my child. Don't praise me too soon. Now, one thing more. Didn't you tell me that there was a back stairway that led up to your guardian's rooms?"

"Yes, monsieur, several of his intimate friends, who are never formally announced, always make use of it mornings."

"Very well; I propose to play the part of an intimate friend myself, then, and give the baron a surprise. Show me the way, my child."

As they were passing through Madame Laîné's room, Ernestine paused and said to the hunchback:

"I have always forgotten to tell you how I managed to leave the house unobserved the night I went to Madame Herbaut's party, M. de Maillefort. That door you see over there opens upon another back stairway that leads down to the street. The door at the foot of it was nailed up a long time ago, but my governess succeeded in opening it, and it was through that door we left the house and entered it."

"Has this door been securely nailed up again?" inquired the hunchback, thoughtfully.

"My governess told me that she had fastened it securely on the inside."

"My dear child, your governess is an unprincipled

woman. She assisted you in making your escape from the house and also favoured your long visits to Herminie. No matter how reprehensible your motives had been, she would have obeyed you just the same, so she is not to be trusted."

"I have no confidence in her, of course, M. de Maillefort, and, as soon as I can, I intend to pay her liberally, as I promised, and send her away."

"This door, which affords such easy access to your apartments and which is so entirely at this woman's disposal, seems to me a very bad thing," remarked the hunchback. "You had better tell your guardian to-day that you have discovered this door, and ask him to have it walled up as soon as possible, or else give you some other room."

"I will do as you say, monsieur, but what fears can you have on the subject?"

"I have no well-founded fears at all, my dear child. I consider the walling up of this door as, first, a matter of propriety, and subsequently as a matter of prudence. There is nothing in this to alarm you in the least. Now, *au revoir*. I am going to have a bout with your guardian, and hope to have some good news for you on my return."

A moment afterwards M. de Maillefort had reached the floor above. Seeing a key in the lock of the door in front of him, he opened this door, and, finding himself in a narrow passage, he followed this passage until he came to a second door, which he opened like the first and found himself in M. de la Rochaiguë's study.

That gentleman was seated with his back to the door, reading, in the morning paper, an account of the proceedings during the session of the Chamber of Peers the day before. Hearing the door open, he turned his head and saw the hunchback, who came briskly, even gaily, forward, and, giving him a friendly nod of the head, exclaimed, blithely:

"Good morning, my dear baron, good morning!"

M. de la Rochaiguë was too much astounded to utter a word.

Leaning back in his armchair, his hands still clutching the paper, he sat like one petrified, though his eyes were full of surprise and anger.

"You see, my dear baron, I am assuming all the privileges of an intimate friend and making myself quite at home," continued the hunchback, in the same jovial, almost affectionate tone, as he seated himself in an armchair near the fireplace.

M. de la Rochaiguë was fairly purple with rage by this time, but, having a wholesome fear of the marquis, he controlled his wrath as best he could, and said, rising abruptly:

"It seems incredible, unheard of, outrageous, that — that I should have your presence thus forced upon me, monsieur, after that scene the other evening, and — and —"

"My dear baron, excuse me, but if I had requested the honour of an interview, you would have refused it, would you not?"

"Most assuredly I should, monsieur, for —"

"So I very wisely decided to take you by surprise. Now do me the favour to sit down, and let us talk this matter over like a couple of friends."

"Friends? You have the audacity to say that, monsieur; you, who ever since I first had the misfortune to know you, have fairly hounded me with sneers and sarcasms which — which I have returned in kind," added the baron, with true parliamentary aplomb. "A friend? you, monsieur, who have just outdone yourself by —"

"My dear baron," said the hunchback, interrupting M. de la Rochaiguë afresh, "did you ever see an amusing comedy by Scribe, called 'A Woman's Hatred'?"

"I am unable to see any connection —"

"But you will, my dear baron. In this little play,

a young and pretty woman seems to pursue with the bitterest animosity a young man, whom in her secret heart she adores."

"And what of that, may I ask?"

"Well, my dear baron, with this slight difference, viz., that you are not a young man, and I am not a pretty woman who adores you, our relative positions are exactly the same as those of the hero and heroine in Scribe's little comedy."

"Once more, monsieur, I —"

"My dear baron, one question, if you please. Have you political aspirations, — yes, or no?"

"Monsieur —"

"Oh, put all false modesty aside and answer me frankly. Do you consider yourself a politician or not?"

On hearing this allusion to his pet hobby, the poor baron, forgetting his resentment, puffed out his cheeks, and, slipping his left hand in the bosom of his dressing-gown while he gesticulated with his right, assumed a parliamentary attitude and majestically responded:

"If a most profound, extended, and conscientious study of the internal and external condition of France, if a certain aptitude for public speaking, and a devoted love of country constitute a politician, I might reasonably aspire to that rôle. Yes, and but for you, monsieur, — but for your outrageous attack upon M. de Mornand, — I might not only aspire to, but assume that rôle at an early day."

"True, my dear baron, and I must confess that it was with unutterable satisfaction that I killed two birds with one stone by preventing a base and corrupt man like M. de Mornand from marrying your ward, and at the same time preventing you from becoming a peer of France."

"Yes, from satisfying my ridiculous ambition, as you have told me to my face more than once, monsieur, and I repel the insulting aspersion with scorn and dis-

dain. There is nothing ridiculous about my ambition, monsieur."

"It is ridiculous in every respect, my dear baron."

"Have you come here to insult me, monsieur?"

"Do you know why your ambition is ridiculous and out of place, my dear baron? It is because you long for a field of labour in which your political talents will be entirely wasted, completely swallowed up, so to speak."

"What, monsieur, can it be you that I hear speaking of my political talents when you have never neglected an opportunity to sneer at them?"

"A 'Woman's Hatred,' my dear baron, a 'Woman's Hatred'!"

And as M. de la Rochaiguë gazed at the hunchback with a bewildered air, the latter gentleman continued:

"You know, of course, that you and I belong to the same political party, my dear baron."

"I was not aware of that fact, monsieur; still, it should not surprise me. Persons of exalted rank are inevitably the born, immutable, and unwavering advocates, champions, and representatives of the traditions of the past."

"And it is for this very reason that I am so bitterly opposed to your holding a seat in the Chamber of Peers, my dear baron."

"You amaze me greatly, infinitely, prodigiously, monsieur," said the baron, hanging upon his visitor's words with breathless eagerness now.

"Can it be that M. de la Rochaiguë is really so blind, or that this mistake is due to bad advisers? I have said to myself again and again. He must, with reason, desire to bring about a return to the traditions of the past, and there cannot be the slightest doubt that he possesses many of the requisites to effect such a consummation: birth, talents, an extended knowledge of political affairs, and antecedents entirely free of any troublesome entanglements —"

When this enumeration of his political qualifications began, M. de la Rochaiguë might have been seen to smile almost imperceptibly, but when the hunchback paused to take breath, the baron's long teeth were exposed to view.

Noting this sure sign of internal satisfaction, the marquis continued:

"And where does the baron propose to bury all these talents? In the Upper Chamber, which is already filled to overflowing with members of the aristocracy. What will be the result? Why, in spite of his talents, this unfortunate baron will be completely swallowed up in this overwhelming majority. He will necessarily, too, be regarded as a mere dummy or tool, as he will owe his political position to party favour, and his energetic plainness of speech as well as the — the — pray give me the word, baron — the ardour of his impassioned oratory will be hampered by personal obligations."

"But why do you tell me all this at this late day, monsieur?" exclaimed the baron, in tones of heartfelt reproach.

But the marquis, without giving any sign of having heard the baron's question, continued:

"How different it would be if this unfortunate baron began his political career in the Chamber of Deputies! He would not enter that body by favour, but by a public election — by the will of the people. Under these circumstances, how forcible the words of this energetic and faithful representative of the traditions of the past would become! It could not be said of him: 'Your opinion is that of the favoured class to which you belong.' Far from it, for the baron could reply, and justly: 'No, my views are the views of the nation, as it is the nation that sent me here.'"

"What you say is true, perfectly true, monsieur, but why did you defer telling me so long?"

"Why, baron? Why, because you manifested such

a deep distrust and such an intense antipathy to me."

"On the contrary, it was you, marquis, who seemed to pursue me with relentless cruelty."

"Very possibly, for I was continually saying to myself: 'Ah, if the baron is so blind as to neglect the opportunity to play such a magnificent rôle, he shall bear the penalty of it. I will give him no peace.' Nor have I; but when the time came to prevent you from committing such a fatal blunder — I did it."

"But marquis, permit me to say — "

"You do not belong to yourself, monsieur, you belong to your party, and the injury you do yourself will reflect upon the other members of your party. You are consequently an egotist, a heartless — "

"One word, monsieur, one word."

"Ambitious man who prefers to owe his position to political favour rather than to a public election."

"You talk very lightly of a public election, monsieur. Do you believe that a seat in either political body can be secured so easily, no matter how well fitted the person may be to fill such a position? (In speaking in this way of myself, I am only repeating your words, remember.) You may not be aware that I have been trying to secure a seat in the Chamber of Peers ten years, monsieur."

"Nonsense! You could be a deputy in less than a month if you chose."

"I?"

"Yes, you, Baron de la Rochaiguë."

"I, a deputy! That would be magnificent, marquis, for you have opened my eyes to the vast, immense, infinite field of labour that would lie before me. But how could I secure an election?"

"It so happens that the electors of the district where my estates are situated desire to confer the honour of representing them upon me."

"You, M. le marquis?"

"Yes, I! Just imagine what an idea people will form of those worthy fellows down there from their representative. People will fancy when they see me that I am the envoy of a colony founded by Punchinello."

This lively sally excited considerable hilarity on the part of the baron, who manifested it as usual by displaying his long teeth several times.

"If my district was located in a mountainous country, there might be some sense in my election," continued the marquis, indicating his hump by a laughing gesture, to keep the baron in good humour, doubtless.

"Really, marquis," exclaimed M. de la Rochaiguë, much amused, "you certainly do the honours of yourself with wonderful grace and wit."

"Then shout, 'Long live my hump!' my dear baron, for you little know what you — no, our party — will perhaps owe to it!"

"I — our party — owe anything to your — " the baron hesitated — "to your — to your gibbosity."

"Gibbosity is a remarkably well chosen word, baron. You were evidently born for the tribune, and, as I said before, you can be a deputy in less than a month if you choose."

"Once more may I beg you to explain, marquis."

"Nothing could be simpler. Be a deputy in my stead."

"You are jesting."

"Not at all. I should only make the Chamber laugh. You will hold it captive by your eloquence, and our party will consequently be much the gainer by the change. I will introduce you to three or four delegates who have been chosen by my constituents, and who really control the elections down there, and I am sure I shall have little or no difficulty in persuading them to accept you in my stead. I will write to them this afternoon; day after to-morrow they will be here, and by the following day everything will be settled."

"Really, marquis, I scarcely know whether I am awake or dreaming. You, whom I have hitherto regarded as a bitter enemy —"

"Only a 'Woman's Hatred,' you know — or, if you like it better, the 'Hatred of a Political Friend.'"

"It seems inconceivable."

"So even as I ruined your absurd plans for securing a peerage at the same time that I prevented you from marrying your ward to an unprincipled scoundrel, I now propose to make you a deputy, and at the same time secure your consent to her marriage with a worthy young man who loves her, and whom she loves in return."

On hearing this announcement, M. de la Rochaiguë moved uneasily in his chair, cast a suspicious look at the marquis, and answered, coldly:

"I have been your dupe, I see, M. le marquis; I fell into the trap like a fool."

"What trap, my dear baron?"

"Your pretended anger at the course my political aspirations had taken, your flattery, your proposal to make me a deputy in your stead, all conceal an ulterior motive. Fortunately, I divine it — I unmask it — I unveil it."

"You are sure to become Minister of Foreign Affairs, baron, if you manifest like perspicuity in political matters."

"A truce to pleasantries, monsieur."

"So be it, monsieur. You must believe one of two things: I am either mocking you by pretending to take your political aspirations seriously, or else I really see in you the stuff from which statesmen are made. It is for you to decide which of these hypotheses is the correct one. Now, to state the case simply but clearly, your ward has made an admirable choice, as I will prove to you. Consent to this marriage, and I will have you elected deputy. That is the bright side of the medal."

"Ah, there are two sides?" sneered the baron.

"Naturally. I have shown you the good side; this is the bad: You and your wife and sister have grossly abused the trust confided to you—"

"Monsieur—"

"Oh, I can prove it. All three of you have either favoured or been personally mixed up in the most abominable intrigues, of which Mlle. de Beaumesnil was to be the victim. I repeat that I have abundant proofs of this fact, and Mlle. de Beaumesnil herself will unite with me in exposing these nefarious schemes."

"And to whom do you propose to denounce us, if you please?"

"To the members of the family council which Mlle. de Beaumesnil will convoke at once. You can guess what the result of such a proceeding will be. Your appointment as guardian will be annulled, forthwith."

"We will see about that! We will see about that, monsieur!"

"You will certainly have an admirable chance to see about it. Now choose. Consent to this marriage and you are a deputy. Refuse your consent, there will be a frightful scandal; you will be deprived of your guardianship, and all your ambitious hopes will be blighted for ever!"

"Ah, you censure me for having desired to marry my ward in a way that might benefit me personally, and yet you—you propose to do the same thing you censure me for, yourself."

"There is not the slightest justice in your comparison, my dear sir. You were trying to marry your ward to a scoundrel; I want to marry her to an honourable man, and I offer you a certain price for your consent, because you have proved to me that it is necessary to give a certain price for your consent."

"And why, if the person you have selected for Mlle. de Beaumesnil is a suitable person?"

"The husband I have suggested, and that Mlle. de Beaumesnil desires, is a perfectly honourable man —"

"And his fortune, social position, etc., — these are all that can be desired, I suppose."

"He is a lieutenant in the army, without either name or fortune, but he is one of the bravest and most honest men I know. He loves Ernestine, and she loves him in return. What objection have you to offer?"

"What objection have I to offer? A mere nobody, whose only possessions are his cloak and sword, marry the richest heiress in France! Never. Do you hear me? Never will I consent to such an unequal marriage! M. de Mornand at least had a fair prospect of becoming a minister, an ambassador, or president of the Chamber, monsieur."

"So you see, baron, I was very wise to offer you a handsome price for your consent."

"But according to you, monsieur, in thus allowing myself to be influenced by motives of personal aggrandisement, I should be acting very —"

"Disgracefully. Still, that does not matter, provided Ernestine's happiness can be assured."

"And it is a person capable of an act you consider so dishonourable that you dare to propose to the electors of your district as their representative!" exclaimed the baron, triumphantly. "You would so abuse their confidence as to give them, as a representative of our party, a man who —"

"In the first place, the electors in question are a parcel of fools, my dear sir; besides, I do not interfere with their right of suffrage in the least. They imagine, because I am a marquis, that I should be just as fanatical a partisan of church and throne as their late deputy. They even told me that, in case of my refusal, they should consider it a favour if I would designate some other suitable person. I offer them as a candidate a man of their own party, perfectly capable of representing them.

(It is not very high praise, my dear baron, to say that you are at least as gifted a man as their deceased deputy.) The rest is for you to decide, for I need not tell you that I was only jesting a few minutes ago when I said that your political sentiments and mine were identical. It was merely a means of paving the way to the offer which I have made, and which I reiterate. And now, you will, perhaps, ask me why, if I feel confident of my ability to compel you to resign your guardianship of Mlle. de Beaumesnil, I do not do it."

"I should like to ask you that very plain question, monsieur," responded the baron.

"My explanation will be very simple, my dear sir. It is because I do not believe there is, among the other persons to whom this guardianship is likely to be entrusted, any man with sense and heart enough to understand why the richest heiress in France might be permitted to marry a brave and honourable man without either rank or fortune. So, as I should have the same difficulty to contend with in another guardian, but not have the same effectual means of coercing him, perhaps, such a change might injure rather than aid my plans, besides ruining you irretrievably. Now reflect, and make your choice. I shall expect to see you at my house to-morrow morning, not later than ten o'clock."

And the marquis departed, leaving M. de la Rochaiguë in a state of painful perplexity.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER.

THREE days had elapsed since M. de Maillefort's interviews with Madame de Senneterre and M. de la Rochaiguë, and Herminie, alone in her pretty room, seemed a prey to the keenest anxiety; for every now and then she cast an impatient glance at the clock, or started at the slightest sound, or turned hastily towards the door.

In fact, one could discern in the face of the duchess an anxiety fully equal to that which she had experienced some time before, while in momentary expectation of the much dreaded M. Bouffard's coming.

And yet it was not a visit from M. Bouffard, but from M. de Maillefort, that caused the girl's agitation.

The flowers in the pretty little room had just been renewed, and the muslin curtains at the windows that overlooked the garden had been freshly laundered. These windows were open, but the green outside shutters were closed to keep out the glare.

After setting her house in order with scrupulous care, the duchess had evidently made an unusually careful toilet, for she had donned her best dress, a high-necked, black levantine, with chemisette and sleeves of dazzling whiteness. Her sole ornament was her magnificent hair, which gleamed like burnished gold in the sunlight, but never had her beauty seemed more noble and touching in its character, for, for some time past, her face had been paler, though her complexion had lost none of its dazzling clearness.

The duchess had just given another quick glance at the door, when she fancied she heard a footstep outside, near the window that overlooked the garden, and she was about to rise and satisfy her doubts, when the door opened, and Madame Moufflon ushered in M. de Maillefort.

That gentleman was hardly in the room, however, before he turned and said to the portress:

"A lady will come and ask to see Mlle. Herminie, in a few moments — you will admit her."

"Yes, monsieur," replied Madame Moufflon, deferentially, as she took her departure.

On hearing the words, "A lady will come and ask to see Mlle. Herminie," the girl sprang forward hastily, exclaiming:

"*Mon Dieu!* M. le marquis, — this lady — whom you expect — ?"

"Is she!" replied the marquis, radiant with joy and hope. "Yes, she is coming at last!"

Then, seeing Herminie turn as pale as death and tremble violently in every limb, the hunchback cried:

"What is the matter, my child? Tell me, what is the matter?"

"Ah, monsieur," said the duchess, faintly, "I don't know why, but now, oh, I feel so afraid!"

"Afraid! when Madame de Senneterre has pledged herself to make the concession which you were very right to ask, but which you had little hope that she would ever grant!"

"Alas! monsieur, now, for the first time, I seem to understand the temerity, the impropriety, perhaps, of my demand."

"My dear child," exclaimed the hunchback, anxiously, "no weakness, I beg, or you will lose all. Be your own noble, charming self, the personification of modesty without humility, and of dignity without arrogance, and all will be well, — I trust."

"Ah, monsieur, when you told me yesterday that there was a possibility of this visit from Madame de Senneterre, I thought my cup of joy would be filled to overflowing, if this hope should be realised, and now I feel only the most abject terror and alarm."

"Here she comes! Summon up all your courage, my child, for God's sake, and think of Gerald!" exclaimed the hunchback, hearing a carriage stop at the door.

"Oh, monsieur, have pity on me," murmured the duchess, clutching M. de Maillefort's hand convulsively. "Oh, I shall never dare — "

"Poor child! she is going to ruin her prospects, I fear," thought the marquis.

Almost at that very instant the door opened, and Madame de Senneterre entered.

She was a tall and slender woman, with an exceedingly haughty manner, and she came into the room with head high in the air, an insolent gleam in her eyes, and a disdainful smile upon her lips. She had an unusually high colour, and seemed to find it difficult to control her feelings.

The fact is, Madame de Senneterre was violently agitated by conflicting emotions. This ridiculously proud and arrogant woman had left her home firmly resolved to make the concession towards Herminie which M. de Maillefort demanded, and in return for which he had promised to adopt the young girl.

Madame de Senneterre had consequently resolved that during this visit, which cost her pride so much, her demeanour should be scrupulously, though coldly, polite; but as the moment for the interview approached, and as this arrogant woman reflected that she, the Duchesse de Senneterre, was about to present herself as a petitioner at the home of an obscure young girl, who worked for her living, the implacable pride of the *grande dame* revolted at the thought. Anger filled her heart, she lost her head, and, forgetting the advantages her son would

derive from this marriage, forgetting that, after all, it was the adopted daughter of the Prince Duc de Haut-Martel she was about to visit, and not the poor music teacher, Madame de Senneterre reached Herminie's home with no intention of adopting any conciliatory measures, but resolved to treat this insolent creature, who had been so audacious in her pretensions, as she deserved to be treated.

On seeing the haughtiness, aggressiveness, and anger so legibly imprinted on Madame de Senneterre's features, the marquis, no less surprised than alarmed, understood the sudden change which had taken place in the intentions of Gerald's mother, and said to himself, despairingly:

"All is lost!"

As for Herminie, she did not seem to have a drop of blood in her veins. Her beautiful face had become frightfully pale; her lips, which were almost blue, trembled convulsively; it seemed impossible for her to raise her eyes — in fact, she seemed unable to make the slightest movement, or even to utter a word.

In spite of the high terms in which M. de Maillefort had spoken of this young girl whom he esteemed so highly as to be willing to give her his name, Madame de Senneterre, too insufferably proud as well as opinionated to concede that Herminie's conduct might have been prompted solely by a sense of dignity, had expected to find herself confronted by a vain, pert, rather coarse, ill-bred girl, proud of her conquest, and resolved to make the most of it; so, as Gerald's mother, she had armed herself with the most insulting disdain and arrogance of of manner.

She was consequently both astonished and discomfited at the sight of this charming but timid creature, of such rare loveliness and wonderful distinction of manner, who, instead of giving herself any impertinent airs, did not even dare to raise her eyes, and seemed more

dead than alive in the presence of the great lady from whom she had exacted this visit.

"Good Heavens, how beautiful she is!" Madame de Senneterre said to herself, with a strange mixture of spitefulness and involuntary admiration. "What a refined and distinguished looking young woman this poor, obscure music teacher is! It is simply marvellous! My own daughters are not to be compared with her."

Though it has taken some time to describe these conflicting sentiments in the heart of Madame de Senneterre, their coming and going had been well-nigh simultaneous, and only a few seconds had elapsed after her entrance into the room before, blushing for the sort of embarrassment and dismay that she had at first experienced, she broke the silence by demanding in haughty, supercilious tones:

"Mlle. Herminie, is she here?"

"I am she, madame la duchesse," faltered Herminie, while M. de Maillefort stood watching the scene with growing anxiety.

"Mlle. Herminie — the music teacher?" repeated Madame de Senneterre, with a contemptuous emphasis on the last word. "You are that young person, I suppose."

"Yes, madame la duchesse," replied the poor girl, trembling like a leaf, and without venturing to raise her eyes.

"Well, mademoiselle, you are satisfied, I trust? You have had the audacity to insist that I should come here, and here I am."

"I felt constrained — madame la duchesse — to solicit the honour — that — that —"

"Indeed! And what right have you to presume to make this insolent demand?"

"Madame!" exclaimed the hunchback, threateningly.

But as Madame de Senneterre uttered these last insulting words, Herminie, who had seemed so terrified, so utterly crushed until then, lifted her head proudly, a

slight tinge of colour suffused her cheeks, and, raising her large blue eyes for the first time to the face of Gerald's mother, she replied in firm though gentle tones:

"I have never felt that I had the right to expect even the slightest mark of deference from you, madame. On the contrary, I only desired to — to testify the respect that I felt for your authority, madame, by declaring to M. de Senneterre that I could not and would not accept his hand without his mother's consent."

"And I — a person of my age and position — must humiliate myself by making the first advances to mademoiselle?"

"I am an orphan, madame, without a relative in the world. I could designate no one else for you to approach on the subject, and my dignity would not permit me to go to you and solicit — "

"Your dignity, — this is really very amusing!" exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, infuriated at finding herself obliged to acknowledge the charming reserve and perfect dignity of the girl's demeanour under such very trying circumstances. "Could anything be more extraordinary?" she continued, with a sarcastic laugh. "Mademoiselle has her dignity."

"I have the dignity of virtue, poverty, and honest toil, madame la duchesse," replied Herminie, looking Madame de Senneterre full in the face, this time with such an unflinching, noble air that Gerald's mother became embarrassed and was obliged to avert her eyes.

For several minutes the marquis had found it very difficult to restrain his desire to punish Madame de Senneterre for her insolence to his protégée, but on hearing Herminie's simple but noble reply, he thought her sufficiently avenged.

"So be it, then," responded Madame de Senneterre, in a rather less bitter tone. "You have your dignity, but you can hardly think that for a person to be able to enter one of the most illustrious families in France it

is enough for that person to be honest, virtuous and industrious."

"But I do think so, madame."

"You are not lacking in pride, I must say," exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, thoroughly exasperated. "Mademoiselle doubtless supposes that by marrying M. le Duc de Senneterre she will confer a great honour upon him, as well as upon his family."

"In responding to M. de Senneterre's affection with an affection equal to his own, I feel that I do honour him by my preference as much as he has honoured me. As for M. de Senneterre's family, I know, madame, that they will never be proud of me, but I shall have the consciousness of being worthy of them."

"Good!" exclaimed the hunchback, "good, my brave and noble child!"

Though Madame de Senneterre was making every effort to resist the influence of Herminie's charms, she found herself gradually yielding to it in spite of herself.

The beauty, grace, and exquisite tact of this charming creature exerted a sort of fascination over Gerald's mother, so, fearing she might succumb to it, she resolved to end all temptation to do so by burning her ships behind her, or, in other words, by again resorting to vituperation, so she exclaimed, wrathfully:

"No, no, it shall never be said that I allowed myself to be cajoled by the charms and perfidious words of a mere adventuress, and that I was fool enough to give my consent to her marriage with my son."

The hunchback sprang forward with a terrible look at Madame de Senneterre, but, before he could utter a word, Herminie replied, in faltering tones, while big tears rolled slowly down her cheeks:

"Pardon me, madame. Insult finds me speechless and defenceless, especially when it is M. de Senneterre's mother that insults. I have but one favour to ask of you, madame. It is to remember that I not only antici-

pated this refusal, but accepted it in advance, so it would have been more generous in you not to have come here to crush me with it. What was my crime, madame? Simply to have believed that M. de Senneterre's station in life was as obscure and laborious as my own. But for that, I would have died rather than yielded to such a love."

"What!" exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, "you did not know that my son — "

"M. de Senneterre represented himself to be a man who was obliged to labour hard for his daily bread. I believed him; I loved him, — loved him truly and disinterestedly. When I discovered who he really was, I refused to see him again, for I was resolved that I would never marry him against the wishes of his family. That, madame, is the truth, and the whole truth," added Herminie, in a voice broken with sobs. "This love, for which, thank God, I shall never have to blush, must be sacrificed. I expected it, but I believed I had the right to suffer without the presence of witnesses. I forgive your cruel words, madame. You are a mother, you did not know, perhaps, that I was worthy of your son, — and maternal love is sacred, even if it be in the wrong."

Herminie dried the tears that were streaming down her pale face, then continued, in a weak and faltering voice, for, overcome by this painful scene, she felt that her strength was fast failing her:

"Will you have the goodness to say to M. de Senneterre, madame, that I forgive him the wrong he has, unconsciously, done me. Here, before you — you — his mother — I swear that — I will never see him again, — and you need have no fear of my breaking my word. So, madame, you can leave here reassured and content, — but — but I feel so strangely — M. de Maillefort — come to me — I beg — come — I — "

The poor girl could say no more. Her lips fluttered

feebly, and she cast a despairing look at the hunchback, who sprang forward only just in time to receive her almost lifeless form in his arms. He placed her tenderly in an armchair, then, turning to Madame de Senneterre, with a terrible expression on his face, he cried:

"Ah, you shall weep tears of blood for your cruelty here, madame. Go, go, I tell you. Don't you see that she is dying!"

Herminie did, indeed, look as if death had claimed her for his own, with her marble white face, and her head hanging inertly down upon one shoulder. Her forehead, bathed in a cold sweat, was half covered with some soft ringlets of golden hair which had escaped from their confinement, and an occasional tear forced its way through her half closed eyelids, while ever and anon a convulsive shudder shook her entire body.

M. de Maillefort could not restrain his tears, and, turning to Madame de Senneterre, he exclaimed, bitterly, in a voice hoarse with emotion: "You are gloating over your work, are you not?"

What was the hunchback's astonishment to see compassionate grief and keen remorse plainly imprinted upon this haughty woman's face, for, conquered at last by Herminie's noble and touching resignation, she, in turn, burst into tears, and said to the marquis, in beseeching tones:

"Have pity on me, M. de Maillefort. I came here resolved to keep my promise, but — but my pride revolted in spite of me. I lost my head. Now, I repent, oh, how bitterly! I am ashamed, I am horrified at my heartless conduct."

And, running to Herminie, the duchess tenderly lifted her head and kissed her upon the forehead; then, twining her arms around her to support her, said, in a voice faltering with emotion:

"Poor child! Will she ever forgive me? M. de

Maillefort, ring for assistance, call some one, her pallor terrifies me."

Just then hurried steps were heard in the hall. The door flew open, and Gerald rushed in like one distracted, his eyes wild, his manner threatening, for, from the garden in which he had concealed himself without the knowledge of either Herminie or M. de Maillefort, he had heard his mother's cruel words.

"Gerald!" cried the astonished marquis.

"I was there," the young man exclaimed, pointing to the window. "I heard all, and —"

But the young duke did not complete the sentence, so amazed was he to see his mother supporting Herminie's head upon her bosom.

"My son," exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, "I am truly horrified at what I have done. I consent to everything. She is an angel. May Heaven forgive me!"

"Oh, mother, mother," murmured Gerald, in accents of ineffable gratitude, as he fell upon his knees beside Herminie, and covered her cold hands with tears and kisses.

"You have done wisely," the marquis said, in low tones, to Madame de Senneterre. "It is adoration that your son will feel for you now."

That same instant, seeing Herminie make a slight movement, Gerald exclaimed, joyfully:

"She is recovering consciousness!"

Then, in a thrilling voice, he cried:

"Herminie, it is I. It is Gerald!"

On hearing M. de Senneterre's voice, Herminie gave a slight start, then slowly opened her eyes, which seemed at first fixed and troubled, like the eyes of one awaking from a dream.

Then the sort of mist which seemed to obscure her mental faculties faded away, and the girl slowly raised her head, which had been reposing on Madame de Senneterre's bosom, and looked around her.

To her intense astonishment, she saw that Gerald's mother was supporting her in her arms and watching her with the tenderest solicitude.

Believing she was still in a dream, Herminie hastily raised herself, and passed her burning hands over her eyes, after which her gaze, as it became more and more assured, was directed, first upon M. de Maillefort, who was gazing at her with ineffable delight, and then upon Gerald, who was still kneeling before her.

"Gerald!" she cried, rapturously.

Then, with an expression of mingled hope and fear, she hastily glanced around at Madame de Senneterre, as if to satisfy herself that it was indeed from Gerald's mother that she was receiving these marks of touching interest.

Gerald, noticing the girl's movement, hastily exclaimed:

"Herminie, my mother consents to everything."

"Yes, yes, mademoiselle," exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, effusively. "I consent to everything. There are many wrongs for which I must ask forgiveness,—but my love and tenderness will enable me to gain it at last."

"Can this be true, madame?" cried Herminie, clasping her hands. "Oh, God, can it be possible! You really consent? All this is not a dream?"

"No, Herminie, it is not a dream," exclaimed Gerald, rapturously. "We belong to each other now! You shall soon be my wife."

"No, my noble child, it is not a dream," said M. de Maillefort. "It is a fitting reward for a life of toil and virtue."

"No, mademoiselle, it is not a dream," said Madame de Senneterre, "for it is you," she added, casting a meaning glance at the marquis, "you, Mlle. Herminie, who nobly support yourself by your own exertions, that I joyfully accept as my daughter-in-law in M. de Maillefort's pres-

ence, for I am satisfied that my son could not make a choice more worthy of him, of me, and of his family."

Half an hour afterwards Madame de Senneterre and her son took an affectionate leave of Herminie, who, in company with M. de Maillefort, forthwith repaired to the house of Mlle. de Beaumesnil to tell her the good news, and sustain the courage of the richest heiress in France, for a final and formidable ordeal was in store for her, or, rather, for Olivier.

CHAPTER XXV.

A SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCE.

WHILE M. de Senneterre was taking his mother home, Herminie and M. de Maillefort were bowling swiftly along in the marquis's carriage on their way to Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

The delight of the marquis and his youthful protégée, whose happiness was now assured, can be imagined.

The marquis knew Madame de Senneterre well enough to feel sure that she was incapable of retracting the solemn consent she had given to the marriage of Gerald and Herminie.

Nevertheless, M. de Maillefort resolved to call on Madame de Senneterre the following morning, and assure her that he had not changed his intention of adopting Herminie, who was dearer to him than ever, if that were possible, since he had witnessed her noble and touching behaviour during her interview with the haughty Duchesse de Senneterre.

M. de Maillefort's only fear now was that the proud and sensitive girl might refuse to accept the advantages he was so anxious to confer upon her; but almost sure that he would succeed in overcoming her scruples eventually, he resolved to maintain an absolute silence concerning his intentions for the present.

M. de Maillefort and his companion had been driving along for several minutes, when a block of vehicles at the corner of the Rue de Courcelles obliged their driver to check his horses for an instant.

There was a locksmith's shop on the corner of this street, and the hunchback, who had put his head out of the carriage window to ascertain the cause of the sudden stop, uttered an exclamation of surprise, and, hastily drawing in his head, muttered:

"What can that man be doing there?"

As was natural, Herminie's eyes quickly followed those of the hunchback, and she could not repress a movement of disgust and aversion which M. de Maillefort failed to notice, however, for almost at the same instant he lowered the curtain of the window nearest him.

By drawing this small silken curtain a little aside, the marquis could see without being seen, and through the tiny opening he seemed to be watching something or somebody with considerable uneasiness, while Herminie, not daring to question him, gazed at him wonderingly.

The marquis had caught sight of M. de Ravil in the locksmith's shop, and he could still see him talking with the locksmith, — a man with a kind, honest face. He was showing him a key, and evidently giving him some instructions in regard to it, for, taking the key, the locksmith placed it in his vice just as M. de Maillefort's carriage again started on its way towards the Faubourg St. Germain, and M. de Macreuse's new friend, or, rather, his new accomplice, was lost to sight.

"What is the matter, monsieur?" inquired Herminie, seeing that the hunchback had suddenly become thoughtful.

"I just observed an apparently insignificant thing, my dear child, but it makes me a trifle uneasy. I saw a man in a locksmith's shop just now, showing the locksmith a key. I should not even have noticed the fact, though, if I did not know that the man who had the key was a scoundrel, capable of anything, and under certain circumstances the slightest act of a man like that furnishes food for reflection."

"Is the man you refer to unusually tall, and has he a bad, hard face?"

"So you, too, noticed him?"

"I have had only too much cause to do so, monsieur."

"Explain, my dear child."

So Herminie briefly related Ravil's many futile attempts to obtain access to her since the evening he so grossly insulted her while on her way to Madame de Beaumesnil's.

"If the scoundrel is in the habit of hanging around your house, my dear child, it is not so surprising that we should have seen him in a shop in this part of the town. Still, what can have taken him to this locksmith's?" asked the hunchback, thoughtfully. "Since he became so intimate with that rascal, Macreuse, I have been keeping a close watch on both of them. One of my men is shadowing them, for such creatures as they are are never more dangerous than when they are playing dead, — not that I fear them myself; oh, no, but I do fear for Ernestine."

"For Ernestine?" asked the duchess, with quite as much surprise as uneasiness. "What can she have to fear from creatures like these?"

"You do not know, my dear child, that this Ravil was the most zealous aider and abettor of one of the suitors for Ernestine's hand. Macreuse, too, made equally nefarious attempts to secure this tempting prey. As I unmasked them both in public, I fear that their resentment will fall upon Ernestine, especially as their rage, on finding that they will not be able to make the poor child their victim, is so venomous; but I am watching them closely, and this visit of Ravil to the locksmith — though I cannot imagine the motive of it now — will make me redouble my vigilance."

"But you can hardly imagine that this visit would affect Ernestine in any way."

"I am not at all sure that it does, my dear child, but

I think it strange that De Ravil should take the trouble to seek out a locksmith in this remote part of the town. But let us say no more about it. Such scoundrels as those two men are should not be allowed to mar pure and richly deserved happiness. My task is only half completed. Your happiness is assured, my child, and now I trust this may prove an equally fortunate day for Ernestine. Here we are at last. Find her and tell her of your happiness while I go up to the baron's apartments. I have a few words to say to him, after which I will rejoin you in Ernestine's rooms."

"Did I not hear you say something in regard to a final test?"

"Yes, my dear child."

"Does it relate to M. Olivier?"

"Yes, and if he sustains the ordeal bravely and nobly, as I am sure he will, Ernestine will have no cause to envy you your felicity."

"And did Ernestine consent to this test, monsieur?"

"Yes, my child, for it would not only serve to establish the nobility of Olivier's sentiments beyond a doubt, but also remove any scruples he might feel about marrying Ernestine when he discovers that the little embroideress is the richest heiress in France."

"Alas! monsieur, it is on that point I feel the greatest misgivings. M. Olivier is so extremely sensitive in regard to all money matters, Gerald says."

"And for that very reason I gave my poor brain no rest until I had found, or at least fancied I had found, a means of escape from this danger. I can not explain any further now, but you will soon know all."

Meanwhile the carriage had paused in front of the Rochaiguë mansion. The footman opened the door, and while Herminie hastened to Mlle. de Beaumesnil's apartments the hunchback went up to the baron's study, where he found that gentleman evidently expecting him, for he

promptly advanced to meet him, displaying his long teeth with the most satisfied air imaginable.

The fact is, M. de la Rochaiguë, after reflecting on the marquis's offers,— and threats,— had decided to accept a proposal that would enable him to gratify his political ambition at last, and had consequently given his consent to this marriage under certain conditions that seemed incomprehensible to him,— M. de Maillefort not having deemed it advisable to inform the baron of the double character Mlle. de Beaumesnil had been playing.

"Well, my dear baron, has everything been satisfactorily arranged?" inquired the hunchback.

"Yes, my dear marquis. The interview is to take place here in my study, and, as this room is separated from the adjoining room only by a portière, everything that is said can be distinctly heard in there."

The marquis examined the two rooms for himself and then returned to M. de la Rochaiguë.

"This arrangement will suit perfectly, my dear baron. But tell me, did the inquiries you made in relation to M. Olivier Raymond prove entirely satisfactory?"

"I called on his old colonel in the African army this morning, and M. de Berville spoke of him in the highest possible terms."

"I was sure that he would, my dear baron, but I wished you to satisfy yourself, and from several different sources, of my protégé's irreproachable character."

"He possesses neither wealth nor rank, unfortunately," responded the baron, with a sigh, "but there doesn't seem to be the slightest doubt that he is an exceedingly honest and worthy young man."

"And what you have heard about him is nothing in comparison with what you will soon discover for yourself."

"What! is there still another mystery in store for me, my dear marquis?"

"Have a little patience, and an hour from now you

will know all. By the way, I hope you haven't said a word to your wife or sister in regard to our plans?"

"How can you ask me such a question, my dear marquis? Am I not longing to have my revenge upon Helena and the baroness? Think of their deceiving me as they did! Each of them plotting to bring about a marriage between my ward and one of their protégés, and making me play the most ridiculous rôle. Ah, it will at least be some consolation to outwit them in my turn."

"No weakness, though, baron. Your wife openly boasts that she can make you do exactly as she pleases, — that she leads you around by the nose, in short, — excuse the expression."

"Well, well, we shall see! So she leads me around by the nose, does she?"

"I think we shall have to admit that she has, in days gone by."

"I admit nothing of the kind."

"But now you are a statesman, any such weakness would be unpardonable, for you no longer belong to yourself, and, apropos of this, did you see our delegates again?"

"We had another conference last evening. I talked to them two hours on the subject of an alliance with England."

The baron rose, and slipping his left hand in the bosom of his coat, and assuming his usual oratorical attitude, continued:

"I subsequently gave them my views upon the importation of horned cattle, and briefly expounded the principles of religious liberty as practised in Belgium; and I must admit that your electors seemed much pleased, to say the least."

"I don't doubt it. You must suit them wonderfully well. I am doing them a signal service, for they will find in you — all that is lacking in me."

"You are entirely too modest, my dear marquis."

"Quite the contrary, my dear baron; so as soon as Olivier's and Ernestine's marriage contract is signed, I shall resign my candidacy in your favour."

A servant, entering at this moment, announced that M. Olivier Raymond wished to see M. de la Rochaiguë.

"Ask M. Raymond to wait a moment," replied the baron, and the servant left the room.

"Now, baron, remember that this is a very important, as well as delicate, matter," said the marquis. "Do not forget any of my instructions, and, above all, do not evince any surprise at M. Raymond's answers, no matter how extraordinary they may appear. I will explain everything after your interview with him is over."

"It will be comparatively easy for me to show no surprise at anything I see or hear, marquis, inasmuch as I am very much in the dark with regard to the whole affair myself."

"You will be thoroughly enlightened soon, I tell you. But, by the way, be sure not to forget about the work M. Olivier did for the steward of the Château de Beaumesnil, near Luzarches."

"I shall not forget that, for I intend to introduce the subject in that way; and permit me to say that I am to start out with a colossal lie, my dear marquis."

"But, as this colossal lie is sure to bring out the truth in the most incontrovertible fashion, you need feel no scruples! You will certainly have no cause to regret it, either, for what is about to occur will be quite as much to your advantage as to that of Mlle. de Beaumesnil, perhaps. I am going to summon her now, and do not have M. Olivier ushered in until after you know that we are in the next room, remember."

"Oh, I understand all about that. Go at once, my dear marquis, and use the back stairs. It is the shortest way, and M. Olivier, who is waiting in the library, will not see you."

The marquis complied with these instructions, and soon found himself in Mlle. de Beaumesnil's apartments.

"Ah, M. de Maillefort," exclaimed Ernestine, her face radiant, and her eyes still filled with tears of joy, "Herminie has told me all. Her happiness seems certain to equal mine, — if mine is realised."

"Come quick, my child," exclaimed the hunchback. "M. Olivier is up-stairs now."

"Herminie can accompany me, can she not, M. de Maillefort? She will be near me to keep up my courage — "

"Your courage?"

"Yes, for now I confess that, in spite of myself, I am sorry that I consented to this test."

"But was not this test necessary to overcome Olivier's scruples, my dear child? Remember, too, that these scruples are probably the most dangerous obstacles you will have to overcome now."

"Alas! that is only too true," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil, sadly.

"Then come, my child, come at once. Herminie shall accompany you. She must be the first to congratulate you."

"Or to console me," added Ernestine, unable to conquer her fears. "But it is better I should know my fate as soon as possible," she continued, resolutely. "Let us go up to my guardian's apartments at once, M. de Maillefort."

Three minutes afterwards, Ernestine, Herminie, and M. de Maillefort were in the baron's parlour, which was separated from his study only by a closely drawn portière, which the hunchback opened a little way in order to inform M. de la Rochaiguë that they were there.

"Very well," replied the baron.

He rang the bell.

"Show M. Olivier Raymond in," he said to the servant

who answered the summons, and who almost immediately announced:

"M. Olivier Raymond, sir."

On hearing Olivier enter the adjoining room, Ernestine turned as pale as death, and, seizing with one hand the hand of Herminie, and with the other the hand of M. de Maillefort, she whispered, tremblingly:

"Oh, stay close by me, I entreat you. Do not leave me. Oh, my God, what a solemn moment this is!"

"Hush! Olivier is speaking," whispered M. de Maillefort; "let us listen. We must not miss a word."

And all three listened, with breathless anxiety, to the following conversation between Olivier and M. de la Rochaiguë.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A CRUCIAL MOMENT.

WHEN Olivier Raymond entered M. de la Rochaiguë's study, his face expressed astonishment, mingled with a lively curiosity.

The baron bowed courteously, and, after having motioned his visitor to a seat, inquired:

"Is it to M. Olivier Raymond that I have the honour of speaking?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"A second lieutenant in the Third Hussars?"

"The same, monsieur."

"From the letter I had the honour to write you, monsieur, you know that I am —"

"M. le Baron de la Rochaiguë, monsieur, though I have not the honour of your acquaintance. May I now inquire to what important personal matter you referred in your recent letter?"

"Certainly, monsieur. Pray be kind enough to give me your close attention, and, above all, not to be surprised at any singular, strange, and extraordinary facts which I may have the honour to communicate."

Olivier gazed at the baron with such evident astonishment that Mlle. de Beaumesnil's guardian cast an involuntary glance towards the portière, behind which Herminie, Ernestine, and M. de Maillefort were listening to the conversation.

"Monsieur," continued the baron, again turning to Olivier, "a few weeks ago you were at a château, near

Luzarches, assisting a master mason, who had undertaken some repairs upon this property, in making his estimates."

"That is true, monsieur," replied Olivier, little suspecting the import of all this.

"After these estimates were finished, you remained several days to assist the steward in straightening up his accounts, did you not?"

"That is also true, monsieur."

"This château," resumed the baron, with an air of great importance, "belongs to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, the richest heiress in France."

"I was so informed during my stay there. But may I know the object of these questions?"

"In one moment, monsieur; but will you first oblige me by glancing over this document?"

And the baron took from his desk a folded paper and handed it to Olivier.

While the young man was hastily perusing this document, the baron said:

"You will see by this document, which is a certified copy of the deliberations of the family council, convoked after the death of the late Comtesse de Beaumesnil, you will see, I repeat, from this document, that I am the legally appointed guardian and trustee of Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"I perceive so," replied Olivier, returning the document, "but I fail to see that this fact interests me in any way."

"It was of the utmost importance that you should be enlightened as to my legal, official, and judicial connection with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, in order that what I may have the honour to say to you on the subject of my ward will be invested with irresistible, unmistakable, and incontestable authority in your eyes."

This flow of words, monotonous and measured as the movements of a pendulum, was beginning to make

Olivier all the more impatient, as he could not imagine whither all these grave preliminaries were tending.

In fact, he gazed at the baron with such a bewildered air that M. de la Rochaiguë said to himself:

"One might really suppose that I was talking Hebrew to him. He evinces so little emotion on hearing the name of Mlle. de Beaumesnil that one would suppose he did not even know her. What does all this mean? That cunning devil of a marquis was right when he told me that I must be prepared for very surprising developments."

"May I again inquire in what possible way the fact that you are, or are not, Mlle. de Beaumesnil's guardian interests me?" said Olivier, with ill-suppressed impatience.

"Now for the lie," the baron said to himself. "Let us see what effect it will have."

Then he added aloud:

"You made quite a long stay at the Château de Beaumesnil?"

"I did, as I told you some time ago," responded Olivier, with growing impatience.

"You probably were not aware that Mlle. de Beaumesnil was at the château at the same time that you were."

"Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Yes, monsieur," replied the baron, imperturbably, satisfied that he was lying with true diplomatic ease and assurance; "yes, monsieur, Mlle. de Beaumesnil was at the château while you were there."

"But I was told that the young lady was in a foreign country, monsieur; besides, I saw no one at the château."

"That does not surprise me at all, monsieur. The fact is, Mlle. de Beaumesnil wished to spend the early days of her mourning for her mother at this château, and as she desired complete solitude, every one on the

estate was requested to keep her arrival a profound secret."

"Then it is not strange that I should have been ignorant of it, particularly as I stayed in the house of the steward, quite a little distance from the château. But once more, let me ask — "

"I beg you will not be impatient, monsieur, but listen to me with the closest attention, for the matter to be considered is, I repeat, of the greatest, gravest, and highest importance to you."

"The man nearly drives me mad by his absurd and senseless repetitions!" Olivier mentally exclaimed. "What on earth is he driving at? What possible interest have I in Mlle. de Beaumesnil and her château?"

"The master mason by whom you were employed," continued the baron, suavely, "told our steward that the proceeds of the labour you imposed upon yourself during your leave were to be devoted to aiding your uncle, for whom you felt an almost filial affection."

"Good Heavens, monsieur, why should any importance be attached to such a trivial thing as that? Let us get at the facts of the case."

"The fact is just this, monsieur," resumed the baron, impressively, and with an almost solemn gesture, "your generous conduct towards your uncle was reported to Mlle. de Beaumesnil by her steward."

"Well, what if it was!" exclaimed Olivier, whose patience was now completely exhausted. "What is your object in apprising me of the fact?"

"My object is to let you know that mademoiselle is one of the noblest, best-hearted young ladies in the world, and, being such, is more keenly appreciative of generous acts in others than the majority of people; so when she heard of your devotion to your uncle, she was so touched by it that she desired to see you."

"See me?" repeated Olivier, incredulously.

"Yes, monsieur, my ward wished to see you, but without being seen by you; she was anxious, too, to hear you talk, and, with the aid of her steward, managed to act the part of an unseen auditor at several of your conversations, both with the steward and the master mason by whom you were employed. The strict integrity and nobility of your sentiments were so clearly revealed in these conversations, that my ward was as deeply impressed by your nobility of character as by your pleasing personal attributes, and —"

"Monsieur," interrupted Olivier, turning crimson, "I can scarcely believe that a man of your age and position could find any amusement in such unseemly jesting, and yet I do not suppose for one moment that you are speaking seriously."

"I had the honour, monsieur, to submit for your inspection the documentary evidence that I am Mlle. de Beaumesnil's legally appointed guardian in order that you might give full credence to my words. I subsequently warned you that what I had to say might appear singular, strange, even extraordinary to you, and you surely can not suppose that a man of my age, position, and social prominence would feel any inclination to trifle with the sacred interests entrusted to him or to make as honourable a young man as yourself the victim of a practical joke."

"So be it, monsieur," replied Olivier, pacified by this assurance on the part of the baron, "I confess I was wrong to suppose, even for an instant, that you were capable of such a thing, and yet —"

"Once again will you kindly allow me to remind you of my warning that I had some very extraordinary things to impart," said the baron, again interrupting Olivier. "Now, with your permission, I will proceed with my explanation. Mlle. de Beaumesnil is sixteen years of age. She is the richest heiress in France, consequently," added the baron, emphasising the words strongly and

giving Olivier a meaning look, "consequently she need not trouble herself in the least about the pecuniary condition of the man she will choose for a husband. She desires, above all, to marry a man who pleases her, and who she feels will assure her future happiness. As regards his name and social position, provided his name and social position are honourable and honoured, Mlle. de Beaumesnil is content. Do you understand me at last, monsieur?"

"I have listened to you with the closest attention, M. le baron. I understand perfectly that Mlle. de Beaumesnil intends to marry to her own liking, without much, or, indeed, any regard to the rank and pecuniary condition of the man of her choice. She is perfectly right, I think; but why should I be told all this, — I, who have never met Mlle. de Beaumesnil in my life, and who probably never shall?"

"I have told you this, M. Olivier Raymond, because Mlle. de Beaumesnil is persuaded that in you are united all the attributes she most desires in a husband; so, after having made the most careful inquiries concerning you, — with results which were most flattering to yourself, I must admit, — I, as the guardian of Mlle. de Beaumesnil, am deputised, authorised, and commissioned to offer you her hand in marriage."

The baron might have gone on a good while longer without any interruption from Olivier.

Though the latter was astounded by what he had just heard, he could no longer suppose that this was a hoax on the part of M. de la Rochaiguë, who, in spite of his absurd flights of oratory, was really a grave, dignified man, with perfect manners.

On the other hand, how could he believe, — without an immense amount of conceit, and conceit was not one of Olivier's besetting sins, by any means, — how could he believe that the richest heiress in France had so suddenly lost her heart to him?

A minute or two passed before Olivier spoke. When he did, it was to say:

"I am sure you will excuse my silence and my bewilderment, monsieur, as you, yourself, fully realised that you had some very extraordinary revelations to make — "

"Do not hurry yourself in the least, monsieur. Take plenty of time to recover yourself, for I can very easily understand the mental agitation such a proposition must excite. I should add, however, that Mlle. de Beaumesnil knows perfectly well that you cannot accept her offer until after you have seen her and made her acquaintance. So, if you desire it, I will present you to my ward, and it is my earnest desire that you will both find in your mutual acquaintance a guaranty, hope, and certainty of future happiness."

After which peroration, the baron said to himself:

"Thank Heaven, that is over! Now, I shall discover the answer to this enigma which seems more and more incomprehensible every minute."

Up to this time, Mlle. de Beaumesnil, Herminie, and the hunchback had listened to the conversation in breathless silence. Herminie now understood for the first time the twofold object of the test to which M. de Maillefort had felt it necessary to subject Olivier; but Ernestine, in spite of her confidence in the nobility of the young officer's character, was in torture, as she awaited Olivier's reply to the baron's dazzling offer. The temptation, alas! was so great. How few persons would be able to resist it! Was there any living man who would not forget or ignore a promise made to an unattractive, penniless, and friendless girl, and eagerly embrace the opportunity to acquire colossal wealth?

"*Mon Dieu!* I tremble, in spite of myself," murmured Ernestine. "The renunciation we expect of M. Olivier is above human strength, perhaps. Alas! alas! why did I consent to this test?"

"Courage, my child," whispered the hunchback, "think

only of the happiness and admiration you will feel if Olivier realises our expectations. But hush, he is going to reply."

With a half frenzied movement, Ernestine threw herself into Herminie's arms, and it was thus that the two girls, trembling with fear and hope, awaited Olivier's answer.

The young man could no longer doubt that this most remarkable offer had been made in all seriousness; but unable to explain it on the ground of personal merit, — for Olivier was an extremely modest man, — he attributed it to one of those caprices not uncommon in romantic young persons whose exorbitant wealth places them in an exceptional position, — caprices which in many cases amount to positive eccentricity.

"Monsieur," Olivier began, in a firm voice, after quite a long silence, "though the proposition you have just made to me is so strange, so entirely beyond the bounds of possibility, I might almost say, I give you my word of honour that, inexplicable as it seems to me, I believe in its sincerity."

"You can, monsieur, that is the important thing; that is all I ask of you."

"I do, and I shall make no attempt to fathom the incomprehensible reasons which led Mlle. de Beaumesnil to think of me even for an instant."

"Pardon me, but I have already explained these reasons, monsieur."

"Though I am not particularly modest, these reasons seem to me far from adequate; besides, I have no right to avail myself of this too flattering offer, for — for it is impossible for me — I will not say to accept Mlle. de Beaumesnil's hand — such an important act must necessarily depend upon a thousand unforeseen contingencies, but to — "

"I give you my word of honour, monsieur, that it depends only upon yourself," said the baron, in such

grave tones that Olivier could not fail to be deeply impressed, "understand me, upon yourself, absolutely and entirely. And, if you desire it, I will introduce you to the young lady before an hour has elapsed. It will then be impossible for you to feel the slightest doubt in regard to — to the sincerity of the offer I have just made you."

"I believe you, monsieur, as I said before. I only wish to say that it is impossible for me to even consider the proposition you have been so kind as to make to me."

The baron was astounded now in his turn.

"What, monsieur, you refuse?" he exclaimed. "But no, I cannot have heard you aright. It is impossible that you should be so blind as not to see the immense advantages of such a marriage."

"Then I must endeavour to be more explicit, monsieur. I positively decline your offer, while acknowledging that Mlle. de Beaumesnil's kind intentions are entirely too flattering to me."

"You decline — the richest heiress in France. You treat Mlle. de Beaumesnil's unheard-of concessions with disdain."

"Pardon me," exclaimed Olivier, hastily interrupting him. "I told you just now how deeply honoured I felt by your proposition, so I should be truly inconsolable if you interpreted my refusal as in any respect uncomplimentary to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, whom I have not the honour of knowing."

"But I have offered you an opportunity to make her acquaintance."

"That would be useless, monsieur. I do not doubt Mlle. de Beaumesnil's merits in the least, but as I should tell you all under the circumstances, I am not free. My heart and my honour are alike pledged."

"You are betrothed already?"

"In short, monsieur, I am about to marry a young lady whom I both love and esteem."

"Great God! What are you telling me, monsieur?" exclaimed the unfortunate baron, fairly gasping for breath, so great was his consternation.

"The truth, monsieur, and such an announcement will suffice, I am sure, to convince you that — without the slightest intended disparagement of Mlle. de Beaumesnil — I cannot even consider the proposition you have made to me."

"But if this marriage doesn't come off, I shall lose my deputyship," thought the baron, despairingly. "Why the devil did the marquis insist upon my giving my consent if this young idiot was going to be fool enough to refuse such a colossal fortune? And there is my ward who declared to me this very morning that she would never marry anybody but Olivier Raymond. The marquis told me that I would find this an enigma, but all enigmas have their answers, and this can be no exception to the rule!"

So the baron, unwilling to renounce his hope of political preferment, added aloud:

"My dear sir, I implore you to reflect. Do not decide hastily. You have plighted your troth, — well and good! You love a young girl, you say, — so be it, but thank Heaven, you are still free, and there are sacrifices which one should have the courage to make for the sake of his future. Think, monsieur, an income of more than three million francs a year from landed property! Why, nobody on earth could be expected to refuse such a fortune as that! And the young girl who loves you — if she really loves you for yourself alone — will be the first, if she is not frightfully selfish, to advise you to accept this unexpected good fortune with resignation. An income of over three million francs, my dear sir, and from real estate, remember."

"I have told you that my heart and honour are alike pledged, monsieur, so it pains me to see that, in spite of the favourable reports you have heard concerning me,

you still believe me capable of a base and cowardly act," added Olivier, severely.

"Heaven forbid, my dear sir! I believe you to be the most honourable man in the world, but — "

"Will you do me the favour, monsieur," said Olivier, rising, "to inform Mlle. de Beaumesnil of the reasons that prompted my decision. I feel sure that when she hears them she will consider me worthy of her esteem, though — "

"But you are worthy of something more than esteem, my dear sir. Such disinterestedness is marvellous, admirable, sublime."

"Such disinterestedness on my part is a very simple thing, monsieur. I love and I am loved in return. The happiness of my life depends upon my approaching marriage."

And Olivier started towards the door.

"But take a few days for reflection, I beseech you, monsieur. Do not be guided by this first rash impulse. Again let me venture to remind you that it means an income of over three million francs from — "

"There is nothing more that you wish to say to me, I suppose, monsieur," said Olivier, interrupting the baron, and bowing, as if to take leave of him.

"Monsieur," exclaimed the baron, desperately, "consider, I beg of you, that this refusal on your part is sure to make Mlle. de Beaumesnil very unhappy; for you must realise that a guardian, a grave, conscientious man like myself, would not have taken the step I have, if he had not been absolutely compelled to do so. In other words, my ward will be made miserable by your refusal, — she will die, perhaps — "

"Monsieur, I beseech you, in my turn, to remember the exceedingly painful position in which you are placing me, a position, in fact, that it is impossible for me to endure longer after the announcement of my approaching marriage, which I have felt it my duty to make."

Again Olivier bowed respectfully to the baron, and again he started towards the door, adding, as he opened it:

"I should have been glad to end this interview less abruptly, monsieur. Will you, therefore, be kind enough to excuse me, and to attribute my hasty retreat to an insistence on your part which places me in the most disagreeable, I was about to say the most ridiculous, position imaginable."

And having uttered these words, Olivier walked out of the room, in spite of the baron's despairing protests.

That gentleman, half frantic with disappointment and anger, rushed towards the door leading into the room where the hunchback and the two young girls were standing, and pulling aside the portière, exclaimed:

"And now will you be good enough to explain the meaning of all this? Why have you made such a fool of me? And why does this M. Olivier refuse Mlle. de Beaumesnil's hand, and declare he has never seen her in his life when you assure me that he and my ward are desperately in love with each other?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

But M. de la Rochaiguë's bewilderment was by no means at an end.

The baron had fully expected to find the unseen auditors of the foregoing conversation in a state of intense consternation over M. Olivier's refusal.

Far from it.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil and Herminie, clasped in each other's arms, were laughing and crying and kissing each other in a transport of half delirious joy.

"He refused me! He refused me!" exclaimed Ernestine, in accents of ineffable delight.

"Ah, I told you that M. Olivier would not disappoint our expectations, my dear Ernestine," added Herminie.

"Wasn't I right? Didn't I tell you that he would refuse?" cried the marquis, no less delighted.

"Then why the devil did you make such a fuss about gaining my consent?" demanded the baron, forgetting his dignity in his thorough exasperation. "Why did both of you insist upon my making that young idiot such an unheard-of proposal, if you wanted him to refuse it?"

These words seemed to recall Ernestine to the fact of the baron's existence, for, releasing herself from her friend's arms, she turned a radiant face towards her guardian, and exclaimed, in tones of the most profound gratitude:

"Oh, thank you, monsieur, thank you! I shall owe the happiness of my whole life to you, and I assure you, I shall never prove ungrateful."

"But you must have misunderstood him," cried the baron, "he refuses, he refuses, he refuses, I tell you."

"Yes, he refuses," exclaimed Ernestine, ecstatically. "Ah, has he not the noblest of hearts!"

"They have certainly gone mad, every one of them," murmured the poor baron, in despair.

"But this young man is as good as married,—he won't have you! He says nothing would induce him to have you!" he fairly shouted in Ernestine's ear. "His marriage is to take place very shortly."

"Yes, thank God, there is no further obstacle to that marriage now," cried Ernestine, "so I thank you once again, M. de la Rochaiguë. I thank you with all my heart, and I shall never, never forget what you have done for me."

Fortunately the hunchback now came to the rescue of the unfortunate baron, who really felt as if his poor brain was about to burst.

"I promised you the answer to the enigma, you remember, my dear baron," said M. de Maillefort.

"I think it is time, quite time for you to give it, then, marquis. If you do not, I believe I shall go mad. There is a strange buzzing in my ears, my head feels as if it would split, there are specks floating before my eyes—and—"

"Well, then, listen to me. This morning your ward declared that she would not marry anybody but M. Olivier Raymond, and that the happiness of her life depended upon it, did she not?"

"You certainly are not going to begin that all over again?" exclaimed M. de la Rochaiguë, stamping his foot angrily.

"Have a little patience, baron. I told you afterwards that all the good you had heard in relation to M.

Olivier Raymond was nothing in comparison with what you would soon discover for yourself."

"Well, what have I discovered?"

"Is the disinterestedness which you yourself were obliged to admire nothing? To refuse the richest heiress in France to fulfil a promise of marriage previously made to a penniless young girl — is not such conduct as that — ?"

"Admirable, commendable, worthy of all praise," exclaimed the baron. "I know all that! But I repeat that I shall go stark staring mad if you don't explain why this refusal, which should fill you and my ward with dismay and consternation, seems to delight you beyond measure, — that is, if you are still anxious for Ernestine to marry Olivier."

"I certainly am."

"Well, I'd like to know how you are going to bring it about, for his heart seems to be set upon marrying the other girl."

"And that is precisely what pleases us so much," said the hunchback.

"Delights us, you mean," corrected Ernestine.

"It delights you because he is determined to marry another girl?" exclaimed the baron, positively furious now.

"Yes, but you see this other girl is she!" explained the marquis.

"She — and who is she?" shouted the baron.

"Your ward."

"But the other girl is my ward."

"Certainly," replied Ernestine, triumphantly, "I am the other girl."

"Yes, baron, the other girl, I tell you, is she, your ward."

"Yes, she is Ernestine," added Herminie.

"It is all perfectly clear now, you see," remarked the marquis.

On hearing this explanation, which was even more incomprehensible to him than what had gone before, the unfortunate baron cast a half frantic glance around him, then, closing his eyes, said to the hunchback, in despairing tones:

"M. de Maillefort, you seem to be absolutely pitiless. I have as strong a mind as anybody else, I think, but it is incapable of unravelling such a mystery as this. You promised to give me the answer to this beastly enigma, but the answer is even more incomprehensible than the enigma itself."

"Come, come, my dear baron, calm yourself, and listen to me."

"I have been listening to you for a quarter of an hour or more," groaned the baron, "and yet I am very much worse off than I was in the beginning."

"Well, well, everything shall be made plain now," said the marquis, soothingly.

"Proceed, then, I beg of you."

"Very well, then, these are the facts of the case: Through a combination of circumstances which will be explained later on, and which have no special bearing on the subject now under consideration, your ward met M. Olivier and passed herself off to him as a poor orphan girl, who was supporting herself by her needle. Do you understand thus far, baron?"

"Yes, I understand thus far. What next?"

"Well, by reason of other circumstances with which you will soon be made conversant, your ward and M. Olivier fell in love with each other, he still supposing Mlle. de Beaumesnil to be a friendless and penniless orphan, and so unhappy in her home relations that he felt that he was, and in fact was, exceedingly generous in offering to marry her when he was made an officer."

"In short," exclaimed the baron, straightening himself up to his full height, and speaking in triumphant

tones, — "in short, Ernestine and the other young girl are simply one and the same person."

"Precisely," responded the hunchback.

"And so," continued the baron, wiping the perspiration which his Herculean mental efforts had produced from his brow, — "and so you wished to find out if Olivier loved the other, the poor girl, enough to resist, for her sake, the temptation to marry the richest heiress in France?"

"Exactly, baron."

"Hence your romantic story that Mlle. de Beaumesnil had seen Olivier during his stay at the château and had fallen in love with him."

"It was necessary to find some plausible excuse for the proposal you were commissioned to make to him. This story furnished it, and I must say that you played your part admirably. And M. Olivier, — well, was I wrong in assuring you that M. Olivier Raymond was the soul of honour?"

"He is, indeed!" exclaimed the baron. "Listen, marquis. I am not inclined to revert to the past, but I admit that I considered this a very unsuitable marriage for my ward. Ah, well, now I distinctly assert, affirm, and declare that, after what I have just seen and heard, if my ward were my own daughter, I should say to her: 'Marry M. Raymond, by all means. You could not make a better choice.'"

"Ah, monsieur, I shall never forget those words!" cried Ernestine.

"But this is not all, my dear baron."

"What else can there be, pray?" demanded M. de la Rochaiguë, uneasily, evidently fearing a fresh imbroglio.

"This test had a twofold object. M. Olivier's extreme sensitiveness in pecuniary matters is so well known to his friends that we feared when he discovered that the young girl whom he thought so poor was really Mlle. de Beaumesnil, he, being only a young lieutenant without

either rank or fortune, would absolutely refuse to marry the richest heiress in France, though he had loved her and asked her to be his wife, when he believed her absolutely penniless."

"Such scruples on his part would not surprise me in the least," said the baron. "The fellow is so proud, the slightest hint that he might be considered a fortune-hunter would infuriate him. And now I think of it, the obstacle you fear still exists."

"No, my dear baron."

"But why not?"

"Why, can't you see?" exclaimed Ernestine, joyously. "M. Olivier has positively refused to marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil, the rich heiress, has he not?"

"Unquestionably," said the baron; "still, I don't understand —"

"But when M. Olivier discovers who I really am, how can he feel any fear of being accused of mercenary motives in marrying me, when he had positively refused to accept the proffered hand of the richest heiress in France?"

"Or, in other words, an income of over three million francs," exclaimed the baron, interrupting his ward. "That is true. The idea is an excellent one. I congratulate you upon it, M. le marquis, and I say, with you, that even if M. Olivier were a thousand times more proud and sensitive, he could not hold out against this argument, viz.: 'You positively refused to accept the three million francs when they were offered you, so your motives are necessarily above suspicion.'"

"And it is impossible for M. Olivier to feel any scruples under these circumstances, do you not think so, monsieur?"

"Most assuredly I do, my dear ward. But this revelation will have to be made to M. Olivier sooner or later, I suppose."

"Of course, and I will attend to it," replied the mar-

quis. "I have a plan. We will talk that over together, by and by, baron, that and certain business matters which young girls understand very little about. Am I not right, my child?" added the marquis, with a smile, turning to Ernestine.

"Perfectly right," answered Mlle. de Beaumesnil, "and whatever you and my guardian may decide, I agree to in advance."

"I need not say, my dear baron, that we must maintain the utmost secrecy in relation to all this until the signing of the marriage contract, which I have my reasons for desiring should precede the publishing of the banns. Day after to-morrow will not be too soon, I suppose. What do you think about it, Ernestine?"

"You can guess my reply, monsieur," answered the young girl, blushing and smiling.

Then she added, hastily:

"But mine will not be the only contract to sign. There is another, isn't there, Herminie?"

"That is for M. de Maillefort to decide," replied Herminie, blushingly.

"I approve most decidedly; but who is to attend to all this rather troublesome business?"

"You, of course, M. de Maillefort. You are so good and kind!" cried Ernestine.

"Besides, have you not proved that nothing is impossible to you?" added Herminie.

"Oh, as for the impossibilities achieved, when I think of the scene at your home this morning, you, my dear child, are the one who deserves praise, not I."

On hearing these words, M. de la Rochaiguë, who had seemed to be hardly aware of Herminie's presence before, turned to her, and said:

"Pardon me, my dear young lady; my attention has been so engrossed by what has just occurred that —"

"M. de la Rochaiguë," said Ernestine, taking Herminie by the hand, "I wish to present to you my dearest

friend, or, rather, my sister, for no two sisters could love each other more devotedly than we do."

"But," said the baron, greatly surprised, "if I am not very much mistaken, mademoiselle — mademoiselle is the music teacher we selected for you on account of the extreme delicacy of her conduct in relation to a perfectly just claim upon the Beaumesnil estate."

"You still have some very remarkable things to learn in relation to Mlle. Herminie, my dear baron," said the marquis.

"Indeed? And what are they, may I ask?"

"In the conversation which you and I must have, presently, I will answer your question fully; but now I am sure it will suffice you to know that your ward has placed her friendship as wisely as her love; for I can truly say that the person who would select M. Olivier Raymond for a husband would be certain to select Mlle. Herminie for a friend."

"M. de Maillefort is right," said Mlle. de Beaumesnil, twining her arm affectionately about her friend's waist; "both these greatest blessings came to me the same evening at Madame Herbaut's little party."

"Madame Herbaut's little party!" repeated the baron, opening his eyes wide, in astonishment, "What Madame Herbaut?"

"My dear child, you should be generous, and not give M. de la Rochaiguë any more enigmas to solve this evening," said the hunchback.

"I declare myself utterly incapable of solving them," exclaimed the baron. "My poor brain feels as confused and bewildered as if I had just made a balloon ascension."

"Don't be alarmed, baron," said M. de Maillefort, laughing. "I shall spare your imagination any further flights by soon telling you all there is to tell."

"In that case we will leave you," said Ernestine, smiling. Then she added:

"But I feel it my duty to warn you before I go that

Herminie and I have entered into a conspiracy, M. de la Rochaiguë."

"And what is this conspiracy, young ladies?"

"As it is so late, and as I should certainly become quite crazed with joy if I were left entirely alone with my happiness, Herminie has consented to remain with me until to-morrow morning. We shall dine tête-à-tête, and in the happiest of moods, as you may imagine."

"An admirable arrangement, young ladies, for Madame de la Rochaiguë and I have an engagement to dine out this evening," said the baron; "so a pleasant evening to you."

"I shall see you both again to-morrow," said M. de Maillefort. "There are some details which I am sure you will enjoy, that we must discuss together."

The two girls, radiant with delight, returned to Ernestine's apartments, and, after a daintily served dinner,—which they scarcely touched, so absorbed were they in their new-found joy and happiness,—they retired to Ernestine's chamber, to again talk over the strange vicissitudes of their love affairs and of their friendship.

In about a quarter of an hour they were, to their great regret, interrupted by Madame Laîné, who entered the room after having rapped in a deprecating manner.

"What do you want, my dear Laîné?" asked Ernestine, a trifle impatiently.

"I have a favour to ask of mademoiselle."

"What is it?"

"Mademoiselle is perhaps aware that M. le baron and madame are dining out this evening, and that they will not return home until late."

"Yes, what of it?"

"Mlle. Helena, wishing the servants to profit by the leisure evening monsieur's and madame's absence affords them, secured three loges at the Gaîté Theatre this morning, where they are playing 'The Maccabees,' a drama founded on an episode in Bible history."

"And you, too, wish to go, I suppose, my dear Laîné?"

"If mademoiselle will not need me until it is time for her to retire."

"You can have the entire evening, my dear Laîné, and take Thérèse with you, if you choose."

"But what if mademoiselle should need something before our return?"

"Oh, I shall not need anything. Mlle. Herminie and I will wait on each other. Go, and enjoy yourself, by all means, my dear Laîné, and be sure to take Thérèse with you."

"Mademoiselle is very kind. I thank her a thousand times. If mademoiselle should need anything, she has only to ring, however, for Mlle. Helena told Placide to come down so as to be ready to answer mademoiselle's bell if she rang."

"Very well, I will ring for her if I want anything. Good night, my dear Laîné."

The governess bowed and retired, and the two young girls were left almost alone in the big house, all the other inmates of the dwelling having gone out, with the exception of Mlle. Helena de la Rochaiguë and Placide, that lady's personal attendant, who had been instructed to respond to the summons should Mlle. de Beaumesnil ring.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FOILED!

THE clock had just struck ten.

It was a dark and stormy night, and the howling of the wind was the only sound that broke the profound silence which pervaded the spacious mansion.

The young girls had been talking for two hours of their sad past and their radiant future, though it seemed to them that the interchange of confidence had scarcely begun.

But suddenly Ernestine paused in the middle of a sentence, and, turning her head in the direction of Madame Laîné's room, seemed to listen attentively.

"What is the matter, Ernestine?" inquired Herminie.

"Nothing, my dear, nothing," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil, "I was mistaken, of course."

"But what was it?"

"It seemed to me I heard a sound in Madame Laîné's room."

"What a timid little thing you are!" said Herminie. "It was probably some outside shutter rattling in the wind you heard and —"

But Herminie, making a sudden movement of surprise in her turn, quickly turned her head towards the door that separated Ernestine's bedroom from the adjoining parlour, and said:

"How strange, Ernestine! Did you notice —?"

"That some one turned the key in that door."

Without replying, Herminie ran to the door and turned the knob.

Further doubt was impossible. Some one had, indeed, locked the door on the outside.

"Great Heavens! what does this mean?" whispered Ernestine, really frightened now. "And all the servants are out. Ah, fortunately, Placide, one of Mlle. Helena's maids remained at home."

And rushing to the bell-rope, Mlle. de Beaumesnil pulled it violently several times.

Meanwhile Herminie had recalled the vague uneasiness the marquis had shown that afternoon when he alluded to the intimacy between Ravil and Macreuse, but though she was considerably alarmed herself she did not wish to increase Ernestine's terror, so she said:

"Don't be frightened, my dear; the person you rang for can explain what surprises you so much, probably."

"But she doesn't come, and this is the third time I have rung for her!" exclaimed Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

Then, trembling like a leaf, she added, in a whisper, pointing this time to the door which separated her chamber from Madame Laîné's:

"Listen. Oh, my God! don't you hear somebody walking about in there?"

Herminie made her a reassuring gesture, but Mlle. de Beaumesnil, after listening again for an instant, exclaimed with even greater terror:

"Herminie, I tell you I hear some one moving about! They are coming towards the door. Listen!"

"We'll push the bolt and fasten ourselves in," said Herminie, promptly, hastening towards the door.

But just as the young girl was about to place her hand on the bolt, the door suddenly opened, and M. de Macreuse entered the room.

On seeing him, Herminie uttered a cry and sprang back, while this model young man, turning towards some

one who had remained in the next room, exclaimed, in accents of amazement and baffled rage:

"Hell! she is not alone! All is lost!"

On hearing these words, a second intruder appeared.

It was Ravil.

And at the sight of Herminie, he cried, in a no less surprised and angry tone:

"Damnation! that girl here!"

Herminie and Ernestine had retreated to the farther end of the room, and there, clasped in each other's arms as if to afford each other mutual support, they stood, paralysed with fright, and unable to utter a word.

Macreuse and Ravil, at first astounded, and then infuriated by the unexpected presence of Herminie, which seemed likely to ruin their plans, also stood silent and motionless for a moment, gazing inquiringly at each other as if to read in each other's faces what they had better do under such unforeseen circumstances.

The two girls, in spite of their terror, had noted the exclamations of astonishment and dismay which had escaped both Macreuse and his accomplice on finding that Mlle. de Beaumesnil was not alone, as they had anticipated.

The two girls had also noticed the state of consternation in which the founder of the St. Polycarpe mission and his accomplice had been momentarily plunged.

Both these observations served to restore a little courage to the sisters, and, reason coming to their aid, they finally came to the conclusion that together they were as strong as they would have been helpless had either of them found herself at the mercy of these wretches, alone.

So Mlle. de Beaumesnil, realising how great was the danger from which Herminie's presence had saved her, exclaimed, with a tenderness and gratitude which proved the intensity of her anxiety and dread:

"See, Herminie, Heaven has again sent you to act as my protector! But for you I should be lost."

"Courage, my dear, courage!" whispered the duchess. "See how disconcerted the scoundrels look!"

"You are right, Herminie! Such a blissful day as this has been to us can not be spoiled! I have a blind confidence in our star now."

Cheered by this brief interchange of whispered words, the orphans, strengthened, too, by the thought of the radiant future before them, gradually recovered their composure, and at last Ernestine, addressing Macreuse and his accomplice, said, bravely:

"You will not succeed in terrifying us. The first shock is over and your audacity arouses only disdain. In a short time the servants will return, and you will be put out of the house as disgracefully as you entered it."

"It is true we may be compelled to endure your presence for awhile," added Herminie, with bitter scorn; "but in spite of our contempt and aversion, Mlle. de Beaumesnil and I have both been subjected to more severe ordeals."

"What a courageous man you are, M. de Macreuse, to steal at night, with an accomplice, into the room of a young girl you believe to be alone, in order to secure a cowardly revenge for the humiliation that M. de Maillefort, who knows you, inflicted upon you in public!" added Ernestine.

Macreuse and Ravil listened to these sarcasms in silence, interchanging wrathful looks the while.

"My dear Herminie," resumed Mlle. de Beaumesnil, whose countenance was gradually regaining its accustomed serenity, "I may seem very silly to you, and it may be that the great happiness we have experienced to-day has upset me a little, but really all this seems so utterly absurd and ridiculous to me that I can scarcely help laughing."

"I, too, must admit that it seems ridiculous, and even grotesque, to me."

"The discomfiture of these scoundrels is really pitiable," remarked Mlle. de Beaumesnil, bursting into a hearty laugh this time.

"The impotent rage of these conspirators, who excite mirth rather than fear, is extremely amusing," chimed in Herminie, no less gaily.

In fact, the bewilderment of these two scoundrels, who did not consider themselves in the least subjects for mirth, was so ludicrous that the orphans, either because their happiness had, indeed, made them bold, or because they were really brave enough to face this danger unflinchingly, gave way to another burst of feverish, vindictive gaiety, — feverish, because the two girls were naturally excited by the very strangeness of the situation, vindictive, because they were fully conscious of the disappointment and exasperation they were causing Macreuse and Ravil.

The intruders, momentarily disconcerted by the unexpected presence of Herminie, and by the strange hilarity of the young girls, soon began to recover their assurance.

Macreuse, whose drawn features were assuming a more and more threatening expression, whispered a few words in Ravil's ear, whereupon that worthy hastily stepped to the only window in the room, and slipped a small steel chain around the fastening, thus effectually closing the window as well as the inside shutters, and then united the two ends of the chain with a padlock.

This done, it was impossible, of course, to open either the window or shutters from the inside and call for help.

The two girls thus found themselves at the mercy of Macreuse and De Ravil.

The door leading into the sitting-room had been locked on the other side by Mlle. Helena's maid, for it is need-

less to say that this saintly creature and her attendant were Macreuse's accomplices, but both were ignorant that Herminie was still with Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

While Ravil was thus engaged, Macreuse, whose countenance expressed the most execrable sentiments, folded his arms upon his breast, and said, with portentous calmness:

"My first plan has failed by reason of the presence of this accursed creature (indicating Herminie by a gesture). I am frank, you see. But I have ingenuity in plenty, and a devoted friend. You are both in our power. We have two hours at our disposal, and I will convince you that I am not a person to be laughed at long."

These threats, as well as the tone and expression of the man that made them, were rendered even more terrifying by the solitude and entirely defenceless position in which the two girls found themselves; but if tragical things are once viewed in a ridiculous light, anything that increases the horror of them likewise seems to increase the laughter of the beholder, which soon becomes irrepressible.

Macreuse's threats produced this very effect upon the two young girls, for, unfortunately, as he spoke he made an involuntary movement that caused his hat to slip far back on his head, and this, in spite of his threatening, almost ferocious expression, gave such an odd appearance to his rather broad face that the two girls burst into a fresh fit of merriment.

Then came the accomplice's turn.

The girls had watched Ravil's manœuvre with even more curiosity than alarm, but when the time came to pass the hasp of the padlock through the last links of the chain, Ravil, who was a little near-sighted, did not succeed at first, and stamped his foot violently in his anger and impatience.

This elicited another such paroxysm of nervous laughter from the two girls that Macreuse and his accomplice,

amazed, then as deeply exasperated as if they had been slapped in the face, in the presence of a hundred witnesses, lost their heads, and. quite carried away with ferocious rage, sprang towards the young girls, and seized them savagely by the arm.

As they did so, Macreuse, his face livid, his eyes haggard, and positively foaming at the mouth with rage, but with his unfortunate hat still on the back of his head, exclaimed:

"Have we got to kill you to frighten you?"

"Alas! it is not our fault," said Ernestine, bursting into another fit of laughter at the sight of this alike terrible and grotesque figure. "You can only kill us — with laughter."

And Herminie chimed in.

Infuriated beyond expression, there is no knowing to what violence the two villains might have resorted, but at that very instant the door leading into the sitting-room — the door which had been locked on the outside — was suddenly opened, and M. de Maillefort, accompanied by Gerald, burst into the room, exclaiming, in a voice full of anxiety and alarm:

"Have no fears, my children; here we are!"

But judge of the newcomers' astonishment. Both had rushed in, pale and terrified, like persons who had come to rescue a friend from some great danger. And what did they behold?

Two young girls with brilliant colour, sparkling eyes, and bosoms heaving with laughter, while Macreuse and Ravil stood pale with rage and motionless with terror at this unexpected interference.

For an instant the marquis attributed this strange hilarity on the part of the two girls to hysteria, caused by intense fright, but he was speedily reassured by Ernestine, who said:

"Forgive this extraordinary gaiety, my dear M. de Maillefort, but such a strange thing has happened.

"M. de Maildefort, accompanied by Gerald, burst into the room."

Original etching by Adrian Marcel

These two men entered the house by that back stairway I told you about — "

"Yes," said the marquis, turning to Herminie; "the key — this morning — you remember, my child. My presentiments did not deceive me, it seems."

"I must admit that we were terribly frightened at first," replied Herminie, "but when we saw the rage and disappointment of these men, who had expected to find Ernestine alone — "

"And their consternation was so ludicrous," added Mlle. de Beaumesnil, "and we felt so perfectly safe, being together, that what had seemed so terrible at first began — "

"To appear positively ludicrous," added Herminie.

"But just as you came in M. de Macreuse was talking of killing us to cure us of our inclination to laugh," remarked Ernestine.

"Did any one ever see the like of them?" the marquis exclaimed, admiringly, turning to Gerald. "Are they not as brave as they are charming?"

"I admire their courage as much as you do," replied Gerald, "but when I think of the shameful audacity of these scoundrels, whom I hardly dare to look at for fear I shall not be able to control myself and so trample them under my feet, I — "

"Nonsense, my dear Gerald, nonsense!" exclaimed the marquis. "Gentlemen do not touch carrion like that even with their feet. The criminal court will attend to them now."

And turning to the model young man and to Ravil, who had summoned up all their assurance with the evident intention of braving the storm, the hunchback said:

"M. de Macreuse, since your sudden intimacy with M. de Ravil began, knowing what you were both capable of, I have had you closely watched."

"A system of espionage, eh?" said Macreuse, with a haughty smile. "I am not surprised."

"Yes, of espionage," retorted the hunchback. "This morning I happened to see you in a locksmith's. You were showing a key to him, and this excited my suspicions. I consequently redoubled my vigilance, and this evening you and your companion were followed here by two of my men. One of those men remained by the door which he had just seen you open with a false key. The other ran to inform me, and I, in turn, sent him to summon the police, who must be waiting for you this very minute at the foot of the stairway by which you effected an entrance here. They will speedily give you and your worthy friend some idea of the annoyance to which persons who enter an occupied house at night by the aid of false keys expose themselves."

On hearing this announcement, Macreuse and Ravil gave a violent start, and looked at each other, their faces livid with fear.

"You are pretty certain to be sent to the galleys, I think," continued the hunchback, coolly. "But M. de Macreuse can play the part of St. Vincent de Paul there, and excite the admiration of his red-capped colleagues by his Christian virtues."

The sound of footsteps was heard in the room of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's governess.

"The commissioner of police has taken the trouble to come for you, as you don't seem inclined to go down," remarked the marquis. "It is certainly very kind in him."

The door opened almost at that very instant, and a commissioner of police, followed by several members of the force, entered, and said to Macreuse and Ravil:

"I arrest you in the name of the law, and I shall now proceed in your presence to draw up an official report of the criminating facts in the case."

"Come, my dear children," said the marquis to Ernestine and Herminie, "let us leave these gentlemen to attend to their own affairs while we go up to Madame

de la Rochaiguë's apartments to await the return of your guardian."

"The testimony of these young ladies will be indispensable, M. le marquis," said the commissioner, "and I shall do myself the honour to call upon them for it presently."

An hour afterwards, the founder of the St. Polycarpe Mission and his accomplice were both placed in prison, to answer to the charge of having entered an occupied house at night by means of false keys, and of having attempted to intimidate the inmates by threats and violence.

On the return of the baron and baroness, it was decided that Ernestine and Herminie should share Madame de la Rochaiguë's room the rest of the night.

As the hunchback took leave of the young girls, he smilingly remarked to them:

"I have accomplished a good deal since I last saw you. The marriage contracts are drawn up, and they will be signed at Herminie's home at seven o'clock to-morrow evening."

"At my home? How glad I am!" said the duchess.

"Is it not always customary to sign the contract at the house of the bride?" asked the marquis. "And as you and Ernestine are so devoted to each other that you are almost the same as sisters —"

"Exactly the same as sisters, you mean."

"It is only proper that Ernestine's marriage contract should be signed at the home of her elder sister."

So all the next day, Herminie, radiant with happiness, was making important preparations in her pretty, dainty room for the signing of the marriage contracts of the richest heiress in France, and of the adopted daughter of M. le Marquis de Maillefort, Prince Duc de Haut-Martel, — an adoption of which the poor musician had not as yet the slightest suspicion.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN EVENTFUL DAY.

HERMINIE was not the only person who was busily engaged in preparations for the signing of these contracts.

A joyous excitement pervaded a modest little home in the Batignolles, also.

Commander Bernard, Gerald, and Olivier had insisted upon dining together that evening under the same arbour where the opening scene of this story had occurred several months before.

At the conclusion of the repast all three were to repair to Herminie's for the signing of the marriage contract.

A superb autumn afternoon had favoured the realisation of this project, and Madame Barbançon had surpassed herself in her culinary achievements.

Notified in advance this time, she had tended with the utmost solicitude a triumphant *pot au feu*, which was to be followed by some juicy cutlets, a fine roast chicken, and a boiled custard, where the snowy whites of the eggs floated in immaculate whiteness upon a rich vanilla cream.

Poor Madame Barbançon considered this decidedly commonplace menu the *ne plus ultra* of culinary magnificence.

But, alas! in spite of the excellence of the repast, the three guests did little honour to it. Joy had deprived them of their appetites, and the worthy housekeeper, in her disappointment, could not help comparing this dis-

heartening indifference with the zest with which Gerald and Olivier had devoured two helpings of her hastily improvised vinaigrette several months before.

Madame Barbançon had just removed the fowl almost untouched, and as she placed the snow custard on the table, she muttered between her teeth:

"They'll clean this dish sure. One doesn't have to be hungry to eat this. It is the very food for lovers."

"The devil! Mother Barbançon," said the commander, gaily, "here's a dish that reminds me of the snow-banks of Newfoundland. What a pity it is that none of us are the least bit hungry!"

"It is, indeed, for Madame Barbançon has proved herself to be a veritable *cordon bleu* to-day," remarked Gerald.

"It is the finest snow custard that was ever concocted," added Olivier. "We can at least devour it with our eyes."

The housekeeper, who could not believe that she was to be subjected to this last cruel affront, said, in constrained tones:

"You gentlemen must be jesting."

"Jesting about such a sacred thing as your snow custard, Mother Barbançon? The devil take me if I should dare to be as sacrilegious as all that," said the commander. "But as we're not in the least hungry, it is impossible for us to taste your *chef-d'œuvre*."

"Yes, absolutely impossible," repeated the two young men.

The housekeeper did not utter a word, but a sudden contraction of her features betrayed the violence of her resentment plainly enough.

Seizing a soup plate, she emptied nearly half the contents of the dish into it; then, placing it in front of the astonished commander, said, in tones of authority:

"You — you will eat it, monsieur."

"But listen, Mother Barbançon —"

"It is no use to 'Mother Barbançon' me. This is only the second time in ten years that I have had occasion to make a snow custard. I made this in honour of M. Olivier's and M. Gerald's marriages. There are no 'ifs' and 'buts' about it; you are going to eat it."

The unfortunate veteran, seeing only hostile faces around him, — for Gerald and Olivier, the traitors, pretended to uphold the housekeeper, — attempted a compromise.

"All right. I will eat it to-morrow, Mother Barbançon," he said.

"As if a snow custard would keep until to-morrow!" retorted the housekeeper, shrugging her shoulders. "You're going to eat it now, this minute."

"I won't do anything of the kind," exclaimed the veteran, testily. "I'm not going to kill myself for anybody."

"Kill yourself with a snow custard made by me!" exclaimed the housekeeper, as sadly and reproachfully as if her employer had mortally insulted her. "Ah, me! I little expected — after ten years of faithful service — and on such — such a happy day — the day when M. Olivier is to take a wife — to find myself — treated — like — this."

And the worthy woman began to sob violently.

"What on earth is the woman crying about?" exclaimed the veteran, in despair. "You are crazy, my dear woman! Upon my word of honour, you must be crazy!"

"Kill you! Ah, I shall not forget those words for many a long year, I can tell you."

"Oh, come, come now! I'll eat the — Look, don't you see that I am eating it now?" said the unfortunate commander, hastily swallowing a few spoonfuls. "It is delicious, divine, this custard of yours. Are you satisfied now?"

"Yes, monsieur; yes, that satisfies me," said the

housekeeper, drying her tears. "It was a nice custard. I said to myself while I was stirring it, 'I certainly must give my recipe to M. Olivier's little wife.' I must, mustn't I, M. Olivier?"

"Of course you must, Madame Barbançon, for Mlle. Ernestine is going to prove a model housekeeper, I'm sure."

"And the grand pickles I'll teach her to make, — green as grass and crisp as hazelnuts. Oh, you shall see what nice little dishes we will fix up for you, your little wife and I."

Gerald, to whom M. de Maillefort had been obliged to confide the secret of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's masquerade, could not help laughing heartily at the idea of Madame Barbançon giving her cooking recipes to the richest heiress in France.

"What are you laughing at, M. Gerald?" asked the housekeeper. "Have you no confidence in my recipes?"

"I believe in them as I believe in the gospels. I am laughing just because I am so happy, I suppose. That is only natural, I imagine, on one's marriage day."

"There have been monsters who were more ferocious than ever on their marriage day," responded Madame Barbançon, with a gloomy and profoundly mysterious air.

"Nonsense!"

"Think, M. Gerald. Don't you recollect how *he* conducted himself on the day of his marriage with Marie Louise? — the scoundrel!"

Madame Barbançon evidently thought it entirely superfluous to mention the object of her execration by name.

"Come, Mother Barbançon, you had better give us our coffee now," interposed the commander. "It is nearly six o'clock."

"Well, monsieur, that wretch whom you admire so much, on the day of his marriage with Marie Louise,

behaved more cruelly than any tiger to that darling little King of Rome, who, clasping his tiny hands, pleaded in his fresh, sweet voice: 'Papa Emperor, do not desert poor Mamma Josephine.'"

"Oh, yes, yes; I remember it very well," replied Gerald, with wonderful *sang-froid*. "You are speaking of the King of Rome, Josephine's son."

"Certainly, M. Gerald; there were no other children. But, after all, that is nothing in comparison to what the wretch had the audacity to do to the Holy Father, on the very steps of the altar at Notre-Dame."

"What was it he did? I have forgotten."

"It seems," began Madame Barbançon, sententiously, "it seems that at coronations the Pope always takes the crown and places it on the head of the monarch he is crowning. You can imagine how much this must have angered your Bû-û-onaparte, who was already in a huff because he had had to kiss the Pope's toe in the middle of the Carrousel, before those swaggering guards of his. But he kissed it, the scoundrel! He had to. If he hadn't, the *petit homme rouge*, who was against Roustan, and for the pope, would have wrung his neck that very night."

"The Pope's?" asked Gerald.

"Roustan's?" inquired Olivier.

"No, no, gentlemen, not theirs, but Bû-û-onaparte's. Still, no matter about that. What I was going to say was that when the Holy Father was about to crown him, what did that Corsican ogre you are so fond of do — like the low common grocer that he was — but grab the crown from the hands of the poor Holy Father and put it on his head with one hand, while with the other he gave the Holy Father a sound rap on the skull, as if to say to the French people: 'Down with religion, the clergy, and all! It is only to me you must bow the knee.' It was such a blow that he gave the poor Holy Father that he reeled and fell headlong on the steps of

the altar with his cap down over his eyes, and there he gave thanks in Latin, that angel of a man! This goes to prove, M. Olivier," added the housekeeper, as a sort of conclusion and moral, "that marriage only renders Corsican ogres still more ferocious, while I am sure your and M. Gerald's marriage to such dear girls as your sweethearts must be will only make you still more kind and amiable."

And the worthy woman hurried off to bring the coffee and serve it while Commander Bernard filled his big Kummer pipe.

The hilarity caused by Madame Barbançon's story soon gave place to graver and nobler thoughts.

"In spite of her peculiarities, this good woman is right in reminding us that our marriage ought to increase whatever good we have in us," remarked Gerald. "I hardly see how it can fail to do so, do you, Olivier?"

Then perceiving that his friend had fallen into a sort of reverie, Gerald laid a hand affectionately on his shoulder and asked:

"What are you thinking about, Olivier?"

"I was thinking, my dear Gerald, that it was while we were seated at this table, just six months ago, that I spoke to you for the first time about the charming girl everybody here called the duchess, and that you replied: 'Duchesses, don't talk to me of duchesses. I've had enough of them!' and now, thanks to you, she is a real duchess, the Duchesse de Senneterre. How strangely things come about in this world of ours!"

"You are right, my dear boys," said the old naval officer, "and when the present is all that one can desire, it is very pleasant to look back upon the past. Six months ago, for example, who would have guessed that my brave Olivier would now be on the eve of marrying a dear, sweet girl who had saved my life at the risk of her own?"

"And who ever would have supposed that the Mlle.

de Beaumesnil we talked so much about, and upon whom I had matrimonial designs myself, would ever have fallen in love with Olivier?" added Gerald, with a keen look at his friend.

"Oh, don't say any more about that foolish affair, Gerald. It was a mere whim on the part of a spoiled child, — a whim that is probably forgotten even now."

"You are mistaken, Olivier," replied Gerald, gravely. "I have seen Mlle. de Beaumesnil and talked with her, and though she is no older than your Ernestine, she is not a spoiled or capricious child by any means, but a young woman full of good sense and discernment."

"My opinion is that Mlle. de Beaumesnil is at least a young lady of excellent taste, as she was so much pleased with my Olivier," exclaimed the commander, gaily. "But it was too late; the fortress had already surrendered to our dear little Ernestine, who isn't overburdened with money, it is true, but who has the very bravest and noblest heart in the world."

"You are right, uncle," replied Olivier. "The fortress had surrendered, surrendered unconditionally, but even if I had not — "

"What do you mean?" asked Gerald, looking at his friend rather anxiously. "If your affections had been fancy free, wouldn't you have married Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"You're mad, Gerald; of course I wouldn't."

"But why?"

"Do you remember what you said here, at this very table, a few months ago: that when an immensely wealthy man marries an attractive girl because she is charming and worthy of him nobody disapproves of it; but that when a man who has nothing, marries a woman who brings him an enormous fortune, it is disgraceful. Those were almost his very words, were they not, uncle?"

"Undoubtedly."

"One moment," exclaimed Gerald, unable to control

his growing anxiety, "you should also recall the arguments you yourself used, Olivier, to overcome my scruples on the subject of Mlle. de Beaumesnil: if, in spite of her immense fortune, it is evident that you love this young lady as much as you would have loved her had she been poor and obscure, the most suspicious person could not disapprove of such a marriage. Wasn't that what Olivier said, commander, and didn't you agree with him?"

"That is true, M. Gerald; and I am sure nothing could be more just and reasonable, but, thank Heaven, we have no such delicate question to deal with in this instance. Olivier only acted like any other honourable man in refusing to make a wealthy marriage because he loved elsewhere; it was all perfectly natural, it seems to me. I am sure neither you nor I ought to be at all surprised, for you are making a love match as well as Olivier."

"A love match! That is the very word for it!" exclaimed the young officer, enthusiastically. "Ernestine is as gentle and kind as she is ingenuous; and then the dear girl is so grateful that a fine gentleman like myself should be generous enough to marry her!" added Olivier, smiling. "Ah, if you only knew what a charming letter she wrote me yesterday, telling me that her relative consented to everything, and that, if my intentions had not changed, the marriage contract could be signed to-day. You cannot imagine anything more artless, and yet more exquisitely modest and touching than this letter. It proves Ernestine to be the very person I judged her to be from her countenance."

"I have never seen a more attractive face according to my ideas," said the old officer.

"Is it not, my dear uncle? Her features are not so remarkably regular, it is true, but what a gentle expression she has, and what a charming smile, with her little white teeth. And then what superb chestnut hair she

has, and such a slender waist and such a pretty little hand, and the tiniest foot imaginable!"

"Olivier, my boy," said the old officer, pulling out his watch, "you are so engaged in enumerating your sweetheart's charms, that you forget it is almost time to join her, to say nothing of the fact that M. Gerald must have time to go home for his mother so as to take her with him to Mlle. Herminie's house."

"We shall have plenty of time, commander," said Gerald, "but I cannot tell you how delighted I am to see Olivier so deeply in love with his Ernestine."

"Deeply in love, unquestionably, my dear Gerald, to say nothing of the fact that I love her all the more devotedly because she is your dear Herminie's most intimate friend."

"Really, Olivier, it is enough to turn one's head completely, to think of so much happiness and felicity, after so many obstacles and difficulties! Come, my friend, my brother, — for is it not almost as if we were marrying two sisters, or they were marrying two brothers; upon my word, the tears come to my eyes in spite of me, when I think of it! — come, embrace me here before we start. We should look too absurd doing it before all the grand relatives!"

And the two young men embraced each other with fraternal tenderness, while Commander Bernard, anxious to maintain his dignity as a grand relative, tried to conceal his emotion by puffing away lustily at his pipe; after which, Gerald left in hot haste to escort his mother to Herminie's.

Olivier and his uncle were about to start themselves, when they were stopped by Madame Barbançon, who advanced towards them with measured steps, holding on the palms of her extended hands, for fear of soiling it, a superb white cravat starched to the last degree of stiffness and folded ready for wear.

"What the deuce is that, Mother Barbançon?" asked

the veteran, who had already picked up his hat and cane, preparatory to departure.

"It is a cravat I have made for you, monsieur," said the worthy housekeeper, — "a little surprise I ventured upon, as you have nothing but your black cravat to wear on this happy day — and — I — I thought that — "

And the worthy woman, quite overcome with excitement and emotion, burst into tears, unable to finish the sentence.

The old officer, though he positively loathed the idea of swathing his neck in this uncomfortable affair, was so deeply touched by this attention on the part of his housekeeper that his voice trembled with emotion, as he replied:

"Why, Mother Barbançon, Mother Barbançon, what extravagance! I really ought to scold you well."

"See, there is a J and a B for Jacques Bernard, embroidered in each corner," said the housekeeper, calling attention to this decoration with manifest pride.

"True, there are my initials. See, Olivier!" said the good man, delighted with this attention.

"Why, my dear, good woman, you have no idea what pleasure, what great pleasure you have given me!" he added.

"Oh, thank you, monsieur," replied Madame Barbançon, as deeply touched and as joyfully as if she had received the most generous reward.

"But it is getting late," she added. "Look, it is half past six. Quick, monsieur, let me put it on for you."

"Put what on, Mother Barbançon?"

"Why, the cravat, monsieur."

"On me? The deuce take me, if — "

But a meaning look from Olivier made the old officer realise how much chagrin he would cause the worthy housekeeper by refusing to don her gift.

On the other hand, the good man had never worn a

white cravat in his life, and fairly shuddered at the idea of such a piece of neck-gear.

But his natural kindness of heart conquered, and, smothering a sigh, he yielded his neck to Madame Barbançon, saying, in order to complete his exclamation in a manner that would be more flattering to his housekeeper:

"I meant to say, the deuce take me if I refuse, Mother Barbançon, but it is much too fine for me."

"Nothing can be too fine for such an occasion as this, monsieur," said the housekeeper, carefully adjusting the cravat. "It is a great pity that you haven't something better to wear than that old blue coat you've had at least seven years, but with your cross of the Legion of Honour and this handsome cravat," — pulling out the ends of the cravat until they looked like two immense rabbits' ears, and then eying her work complacently,— "you have no cause to blush for your appearance. Ah, monsieur," she added, stepping back a little to see the effect better, "it makes you look twenty years younger, doesn't it, M. Olivier? Besides, it is so — so stylish — it makes you look like a notary, indeed it does."

The poor commander, with his neck imprisoned in the huge cravat that reached up to the middle of his cheeks, turned and looked in the little mirror that hung over the mantel in his bedroom, and it must be confessed that the effect was really very becoming.

"It's a pity it prevents me from turning my head," he said to himself, "but, as Mother Barbançon says, it is rather becoming — and decidedly professional looking," he added, with just the least bit of foppishness.

And the old officer passed his hand rather complacently through his thick white hair.

"Come, uncle, it is quarter of seven," said Olivier, with all a lover's impatience, "and quite time we were off."

"Very well, my boy, we will start at once. Give me my hat and cane, Mother Barbançon," said the old

officer, not daring to look either to the right or left, for fear of disarranging the wonderful rabbit-eared bow.

The evening was superb, and the distance from the Batignolles to the Rue de Monceau very short, so the commander and Olivier proceeded modestly on foot to Herminie's home.

Fortunately the exercise this involved softened the rigid folds of the commander's cravat a little, and though he may have looked a little less imposing when he reached his destination, this fact did not impair in the least the noble expression of his honest, manly face.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE SIGNING OF THE MARRIAGE CONTRACTS.

On the very evening that the two marriage contracts were to be signed, M. Bouffard, the owner of the house that sheltered Herminie, his pianist, as he had styled her ever since the young girl began giving lessons to his daughter, — M. Bouffard came after dinner to make his usual tour of inspection, for rent day was close at hand.

He reached the house about half-past six in the evening, and seated himself in Madame Moufflon's room to question her in regard to the supposed financial condition of the tenants, and to ascertain if any of them showed signs of uneasiness as the dread moment approached.

"Why, no, M. Bouffard. I can't say that any of them do," replied Madame Moufflon, "that is, except the new tenant on the third floor."

"Well, what about him?" inquired M. Bouffard, anxiously.

"When he came here, three months ago, he was as pompous as a lord, but in proportion as rent day approaches, he is becoming polite, distressingly polite to me."

"I shall have to watch the fellow closely, then, Madame Moufflon, that is a very bad sign. Ah, what a pity it is that that handsome young fellow who paid my pianist's rent didn't take to those rooms on the third floor. He wouldn't have — "

M. Bouffard never finished the sentence, for there

came two or three such violent knocks at the porte-cochère that Madame Moufflon and her employer both bounded out of their chairs.

"Well, well, who is it that knocks as I, the owner of the house, would not think of knocking?" exclaimed M. Bouffard. "Let me see who this ill-mannered fellow is," added M. Bouffard, stepping to the door, as the portress pulled the rope.

"The doors, please!" cried a stentorian voice, thus announcing that both doors of the porte-cochère must be opened to admit a carriage.

M. Bouffard and the portress, amazed at this unheard-of demand, stood as if petrified on seeing a tall powdered footman, attired in a bright blue livery trimmed with silver braid, emerge from the shadow.

"Open both doors, quick!" said this liveried giant, authoritatively.

M. Bouffard was so overcome that he bowed low to the lackey.

"Will you never get the doors open? This is outrageous! The prince is waiting —"

"The prince!" gasped M. Bouffard, with another even more profound bow to the footman.

Just then another no less imperious blow of the knocker resounded.

Madame Moufflon drew the cord with an automatic movement exactly as before, and again a voice cried from under the archway:

"Both doors, please!"

And another footman, clad in green and gold livery this time, stepped up to the door of the porter's lodge, at which an acquaintance must have been standing, for he exclaimed:

"What, Lorrain, is that you? I just saw your master's carriage. What's the matter here? Why don't they open the doors? Are the porter and portress asleep?"

"One would think they had glass eyes. Look at them, they don't move."

"And it is madame la duchesse they're keeping waiting. She never gets impatient, oh, no!"

"Madame la duchesse!" repeated M. Bouffard, more and more astounded, but still motionless.

"*Mille tonnerres!* will you open the doors sometime to-night?" demanded one of the footmen.

"But who do you wish to see?" asked M. Bouffard, awakening from his stupor.

"Mlle. Herminie," said the tallest lackey, with an evident respect for the person his master was about to visit.

"Yes, Mlle. Herminie," replied the other.

"The small door to the left, under the archway," said the portress, more and more amazed. "I'll open the doors at once."

"A prince and a duchess, visiting my pianist!" gasped M. Bouffard.

Soon came another knocking, much more gentle this time, and another footman in brown livery, with blue trimmings, came to complete the assemblage of lackeys, exclaiming:

"Is everybody stone-deaf here? The doors, why don't you open the doors, I say?"

M. Bouffard, desperate now, resolved to play a heroic part, so, while the portress was tidying herself up a little so as to usher in Herminie's aristocratic visitors, the ex-grocer rushed out to open the double doors of the porte-cochère. This menial task performed, he had barely time to draw back close to the wall to prevent himself from being crushed by the broad breasts of two superb gray horses attached to an elegant dark blue coupé that dashed in, and, skilfully guided by a tall coachman, stopped short at a sign from one of the footmen, who had stationed himself at Herminie's door.

A hunchback and a stout man, both dressed in black,

alighted from this handsome equipage, and Madame Moufflon made haste to announce to M. Bouffard's pianist:

"M. le Prince Duc de Haut-Martel."

"M. Leroi, notary."

The first carriage had hardly left the door before a handsome landau drove up.

Two ladies and a young man descended from this vehicle, and Madame Moufflon, who thought she must be dreaming, announced to M. Bouffard's pianist:

"Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre."

"Mlle. Berthe de Senneterre."

"M. le Duc de Senneterre."

An elegant brougham having followed these carriages, another guest alighted, and Madame Moufflon announced:

"M. le Baron de la Rochaiguë."

A few minutes afterwards the portress ushered into Mlle. Herminie's apartment the following less pretentious personages:

"Commander Bernard."

"M. Olivier Raymond."

"Mlle. Ernestine Vert-Puis."

"Madame Laîné."

These last two persons had come in a modest cab.

These duties performed, Madame Moufflon rejoined her employer, who was pacing vehemently to and fro, under the porte-cochère, — his forehead covered with big drops of sweat, so intense was his excitement, — saying to himself:

"*Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!* What can these great lords and ladies be doing in my pianist's room? What do you suppose all this means, Mother Moufflon?"

"I don't know what to think, — my brain fairly whirls. I see stars, and I'm so afraid of a stroke of apoplexy, I'm going to put my head under the water spigot to cool it off."

"I have it!" suddenly exclaimed the ex-grocer, triumphantly. "My pianist is giving a concert."

"I don't think so, for the last time I looked in I saw the ladies had laid their wraps on the piano, which was closed, and the entire company was standing in a row, while a notary —"

"What notary? Is there a notary here?"

"Yes, monsieur, the tall, stout man, — with a stomach twice as big as yours. I announced him as 'M. Leroi, notary.' Well, he was seated at Mlle. Herminie's table, with a pile of papers in front of him, and a candle on each side — like a juggler."

"Perhaps he is one," exclaimed M. Bouffard, "or, possibly, a fortune teller."

"But, as I told you just now, I announced him as a notary."

"True, true! Oh, well, I will stay awhile, and perhaps I shall be able to find out something when they leave."

Such a brilliant assemblage had never honoured Herminie's modest little home before, and the young girl experienced the liveliest satisfaction and happiness at this unexpected dénouement of a love that had seemed so hopeless. But the pleasure of welcoming Mlle. Berthe de Senneterre, Gerald's sister, and the eldest daughter of the duchess, filled her cup of joy to overflowing.

"Ah, madame," Herminie had said to the duchess, in a voice trembling with emotion, — for she appreciated the delicacy of this proceeding on the part of Gerald's mother, and felt that it was intended to serve as some reparation for the cruel words of the evening before, — "ah, madame, if I had been asked my most earnest desire, it would have been to see Mlle. de Senneterre here, — that is, if I had dared to hope for the honour."

"Berthe takes too deep an interest in her brother's happiness not to wish to be the first to welcome her

new sister-in-law," replied Madame de Senneterre, in gracious, even affectionate tones.

Then Mlle. de Senneterre, a charming girl, for she strongly resembled Gerald both in appearance and character, had said to Herminie, with delightful affability:

"Yes, mademoiselle, I was anxious to be the first to thank you, for my brother is so happy, and I feel and know that he has a thousand reasons to be."

"I wish I were more worthy to offer M. de Senneterre the only family happiness he can lack," replied Herminie, gently.

And while the two young girls continued this interchange of affectionate words, thus prolonging a little scene in which Herminie gave convincing proof of perfect tact, rare distinction of manner, and a modest and graceful dignity, the hunchback, more and more charmed with his adopted daughter, said, in a whispered aside to Madame de Senneterre:

"Tell me frankly; do you think it would be possible for any person to do better under the circumstances?"

"It is really wonderful. She has an air of the most perfect breeding, combined with marvellous tact, and an apparent familiarity with all the rules and customs of the very best society. In short, she is a born duchess; that is all there is about it."

"And what do you think of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's betrothed, — Gerald's friend and former comrade?"

"You are subjecting me to a hard test, marquis," replied Madame de Senneterre, smothering a sigh, "but I am forced to admit that he is a charming and exceedingly distinguished-looking man, and that I can see little, if any, difference between this gentleman and a member of our own set in manner and bearing. It seems inconceivable to me that people of this class can be so polished and refined. Ah, marquis, marquis, what are we coming to?"

"We are coming to the signing of the contracts, my

dear duchess; but I beg of you," added the hunchback, in a low tone, "not a word that would lead Gerald's friend to suppose that that simply dressed girl is Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"You need feel no fears on that score, marquis. Incomprehensible as this mystery seems to me, I shall not say a word. Have I not maintained the strictest secrecy on the subject of Herminie's adoption? My son is still ignorant of your intentions, but all these mysteries will necessarily be cleared up when the marriage contracts are read."

"I will attend to that, my dear duchess," replied the hunchback. "All I ask of you is that you will keep the secret until I authorise you to speak."

"Oh, I promise you I will do that."

Leaving Madame de Senneterre, who had seated herself beside her daughter, and near Herminie, the hunchback rejoined the notary, and said a few words, to which that official replied with a smile of assent; after which, the marquis said aloud:

"We should now give our attention to the reading of the contracts, I think."

"Undoubtedly," replied Madame de Senneterre.

The different actors in the scene were grouped as follows:

Herminie and Ernestine were seated side by side. On Herminie's right sat Madame and Mlle. de Senneterre, while to the left of Ernestine sat Madame Laîné, who was playing her modest rôle in a very satisfactory fashion.

Standing behind Herminie and Ernestine were Gerald, Olivier, Commander Bernard, and Baron de la Rochaiguë, whose presence astonished Olivier very much, and caused him no little vague uneasiness, though he was still far from suspecting that Ernestine, the little embroideress, and Mlle. de Beaumesnil were one and the same person.

M. de Maillefort had remained at the other end of the

room, seated beside the notary, who, taking up one of the documents, said to the hunchback:

"We will begin, if agreeable to you, M. le marquis, with M. le Duc de Senneterre's contract."

"Certainly," replied the hunchback, smiling. "Mlle. Herminie is older than Mlle. Ernestine, so she is entitled to this honour."

Whereupon the notary, bowing slightly to his auditors, was about to begin the reading of Herminie's marriage contract, when M. de le Rochaiguë, assuming one of his most imposing parliamentary attitudes, said, impressively:

"I ask this honourable assembly's permission to make a few remarks prior to the reading of these contracts."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE BARON HAS HIS REVENGE.

OLIVIER RAYMOND, who had marvelled greatly at the baron's presence before, became decidedly uneasy on hearing this request.

"M. le Baron de la Rochaigué has the floor," responded M. de Maillefort, smiling.

"In heaven's name, what business has that man here?" Olivier whispered to his friend.

"I haven't the slightest idea, upon my word," replied the young duke, with the most innocent air imaginable, "but if we listen we shall soon find out, I suppose."

The baron cleared his throat, slipped his left hand in the bosom of his coat, and said, in his most impressive tones:

"In behalf of certain interests that have been entrusted to me, I beg M. Olivier Raymond to be good enough to answer a few questions I should like to put to him."

"I am at your orders, monsieur," replied Olivier, more and more astonished.

"In that case, I have the honour to ask M. Olivier Raymond if I did not recently offer him, — being empowered, authorised, and commissioned to do so in the capacity of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's guardian, — if I did not offer him, I repeat, the hand of my ward, Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Monsieur," replied Olivier, who was evidently quite as much incensed as embarrassed by this question put to him in the presence of several entire strangers, — "mon-

sieur, I fail to see either the necessity or the propriety of the question you just addressed to me."

"I am, nevertheless, obliged to appeal to the well-known honesty, frankness, and sincerity of the honourable witness," said the marquis, solemnly, "and adjure him to answer this question: Did I, or did I not, offer him the hand of my ward, Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Well, yes, monsieur," answered Olivier, impatiently, "you did."

"And did not M. Olivier Raymond clearly, positively, and categorically decline this offer?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Did not the honourable witness state, as the reason for this refusal, the fact that his heart and honour were alike bound by an engagement that would assure his happiness for life? Were these not, in substance, this honourable gentleman's own words?"

"It is true, monsieur, and, thanks be to God! what was then my dearest hope becomes a reality to-day," added the young man with an eloquent look at Ernestine.

"Such disinterestedness is positively inconceivable," said the Duchesse de Senneterre to her daughter, *sotto voce*. "It was associating with such people that spoiled our poor Gerald so."

Mlle. de Senneterre cast down her eyes and dared not answer her mother, who continued:

"But I fail to understand the situation. If this heroic gentleman declined Mlle. de Beaumesnil, what are she and that idiotic guardian of hers doing here? It is too much of a puzzle for me. Let us wait and see."

In spite of the pride and delight that this public exposition of Olivier's noble conduct excited in Ernestine's heart, she was by no means entirely reassured in regard to the scruples he might feel when he discovered that his little embroideress was Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

"I have now only to thank M. Olivier Raymond for

the very honest, explicit, and straightforward manner in which he has answered the questions that have been addressed to him," said the baron, reseating himself, "and to request this honourable assemblage to kindly take full cognisance of my young friend's noble words."

"Why the devil does that long-toothed, pompous creature have to put in his oar?" whispered Commander Bernard to Olivier, who was standing beside him.

"I haven't the slightest idea, uncle. I am quite as much surprised to find the man here as you are, and why he should desire to refer to the offer he made me now, I cannot imagine."

"Oh, well, it can have no other ill effect than to make your dear Ernestine still more fond of you on learning that you sacrificed a colossal fortune on account of your love for her."

"It is just this sort of publicity given to a very natural act that so annoys me," replied Olivier.

"You are right, my boy," chimed in the old officer. "One does such things as that for one's own approval, not for the approval of others."

Then, turning to the Duc de Senneterre, he added:

"Say, M. Gerald, that little hunchback seated beside the notary is the marquis you were telling us about, is it not?"

"Yes, commander."

"It is very odd. Sometimes he looks as cunning as a fox, and sometimes as kind and gentle as a child. See how tenderly he is gazing at Mlle. Herminie now."

"M. de Maillefort has as noble a heart as yours, commander. That means everything."

"Hush, Gerald," whispered Olivier, "the notary is rising. He is about to read your contract."

"It is a mere form," said Gerald. "The contract is of very little consequence; the real conditions Herminie and I long since settled between ourselves."

The excitement created by M. de la Rochaiguë's in-

terruption having subsided, the notary began to read Herminie's and Gerald's marriage contract; but when, after the customary preliminaries, the notary came to the names and occupations of the parties, M. de Maillefort remarked to him, smiling:

"Skip all that, monsieur, if you please; we know the names. Let us get to the important point, the settlement of pecuniary interests between the parties."

"Very well, M. le marquis," replied the notary.

So he continued:

"'It is agreed by this contract that any property which either of the aforesaid parties now possesses, or may possess at any future time, belongs, and shall belong absolutely to that party, entirely independent of the other contracting party.'"

"It was you, my dear child," the marquis said to Herminie, interrupting the notary, "who, when I explained to you, yesterday, the various methods of settling questions of pecuniary interest between husband and wife, insisted, from motives of delicacy, that each party should hold his or her property absolutely independent of the other, for possessing nothing yourself except the talent by which you have so honourably maintained yourself up to the present time, you refused absolutely the community of interests and property which M. de Senneterre is so anxious to have you accept."

Herminie's eyes drooped, and she blushed deeply, as she replied:

"I am almost certain that M. de Senneterre will excuse and understand my refusal, monsieur."

Gerald bowed respectfully, and Berthe, his pretty sister, whispered delightedly to her mother:

"Mlle. Herminie's sentiments certainly harmonise with her charming and noble face, do they not, mamma?"

"Certainly, oh, certainly," replied Madame de Senneterre, absently; for she was saying to herself all the while: "By this delicacy of feeling, my daughter-in-law,

little suspecting that the marquis intends to make her so rich, has virtually settled all her property upon herself, entirely independent of my son; but she loves him so much that, when she finds that she is rich, she is sure to change this state of affairs."

The notary continued: "'It is also hereby agreed that any male offspring that may result from this marriage shall add to their name of Senneterre that of Haut-Martel. This clause has been consented to by the parties aforesaid, at the request of Louis Auguste, Marquis de Maillefort, Prince Duc de Haut-Martel.'"

Herminie having made a slight movement as if of surprise, the hunchback said to her, glancing at Gerald:

"My dear child, this is a slight concession to ancestral pride, to which Gerald has given his consent, certain that you would have no objection to seeing your son bear, in addition to his own illustrious name, the name of a man who regards you and loves you as his own daughter."

A look of respectful tenderness and gratitude from Herminie was sufficient answer, and the hunchback, turning to the notary, said:

"That is the concluding clause of the contract, is it not?"

"Yes, M. le marquis."

"Then we can now proceed with the reading of Mlle. Ernestine's contract, can we not," asked the hunchback, "and sign both contracts at the same time, afterwards."

"Certainly, M. le marquis," replied the notary.

"Now comes our turn, my boy," whispered the commander to his nephew. "What a pity it is that I haven't a snug little fortune to settle upon you and that dear child in the contract. But alas! all I shall be able to bequeath to you, I'm afraid, is good old Mother Barbançon," added the old officer, half sadly, half smilingly. "A queer wedding present she would be! I did think

of selling our six tablespoons so I could make Ernestine a little present, but Mother Barbançon wouldn't listen to it. Your wife would rather have the silver than jewelry, she said."

"And Mother Barbançon was right, uncle. But hush. He is beginning to read our contract now," for the notary, picking up the second contract, said aloud:

"Shall we also skip the names in this contract?"

"Yes, yes; go on," responded the marquis.

"In that case, I come at once to the first and only clause relative to financial matters in this contract."

"It is not likely to be a lengthy one," whispered Commander Bernard.

"Permit me to interrupt you a moment, monsieur," said Olivier, smiling. "This clause of the contract seems entirely superfluous to me, for, as I had the honour to tell you yesterday, I have nothing but my pay, and Mlle. Ernestine Vert-Puis possesses nothing, save her skill as an embroideress."

"True, monsieur," replied the notary, smiling in his turn, "but as one has to be married under some régime or other, I thought it advisable to adopt this one, and state in the contract that you married Mlle. Ernestine Vert-Puis under the community of goods régime, which stipulates that the husband and wife shall hold and enjoy their property in common."

"It would be more correct to say that we married under the community of no-goods régime," responded Olivier, gaily, "but it makes no difference. As it is customary, we accept the clause, do we not, Mlle. Ernestine?"

"Very willingly, M. Olivier," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

"So, monsieur," continued the young man, laughing, "it is agreed that Mlle. Ernestine and I each turn our entire property into one common fund, — everything,

from my one epaulette to her embroidery needle, — a complete mutual renunciation, as it were."

"There will be only burdens to share," muttered the commander, with a sigh. "Ah, I never before longed to be rich as I do to-day!"

"It is decided, then, that the clause stipulating for a community of property shall remain; so I will proceed," said the notary.

"'The parties aforesaid marry under the community of property régime, and, consequently, agree to share, hold, and enjoy in common all property, real or personal, of any value whatsoever, of which they may now or at any future time be possessed, in their own right, or by inheritance.'"

"By inheritance! Poor things! My cross and my old sword are all they have to expect from me, M. Gerald," whispered the veteran.

"Oh, nonsense, commander," replied Gerald, gaily. "Who knows but you may die a millionaire?"

But as the old officer, not sharing this hope, shook his head, the notary, turning to Ernestine and Olivier, asked:

"This provision is perfectly satisfactory to you, mademoiselle, and to you, monsieur?"

"Whatever is satisfactory to M. Olivier is satisfactory to me," replied Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

"I think the arrangement perfect," answered Olivier, gaily; "and I assure you that never in your life did you insert in any contract a clause that is less likely to excite controversy than this."

"We will now proceed with the signing of the contracts," said the notary, gravely, rising as he spoke.

Madame de Senneterre, having taken advantage of the general movement, to approach M. de la Rochaiguë, now said, like one completely bewildered:

"My dear baron, will you be kind enough to tell me what all this means?"

"What, madame la duchesse?"

"Why, all this mystery that is going on here."

"It is one that brought me nearly to the verge of madness a few days ago, madame la duchesse."

"But does M. Olivier really believe that Mlle. de Beaumesnil is a poor little embroideress?"

"Yes, madame."

"But why did he refuse the offer you made him?"

"Because he loved another, madame."

"And that other?"

"Was my ward."

"What ward?"

"Why, Mlle. de Beaumesnil," replied the baron, with a sort of ferocious joy, delighted to subject another person to the same torture to which the marquis had subjected him.

"Is it possible that you are trying to amuse yourself at my expense, M. le baron?" demanded the duchess, arrogantly.

"Madame la duchesse cannot suppose that I am capable of forgetting myself to such an extent as that."

"Then what does all this mystery mean? And why was it necessary that M. Olivier should be made to repeat that he had refused Mlle. de Beaumesnil's hand, though he is about to sign his marriage contract with her? and —"

"I promised M. de Maillefort I would keep his secret, so you must apply to him, madame la duchesse. He hasn't his equal for solving enigmas."

Despairing of obtaining any satisfaction from the baron, Madame de Senneterre approached M. de Maillefort, and asked:

"Well, marquis, may I know the object —"

"In five minutes you shall know all, my dear duchess," replied the hunchback.

Then he turned, apparently to give some final instructions to the notary.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CONCLUSION.

As the little party approached the table where the two contracts lay, Mlle. de Beaumesnil said to Herminie, in subdued tones, but evidently with no little anxiety:

"Alas! the decisive moment has come! What will M. Olivier think? What will he do? If I had committed some terrible crime and it was about to be made public, I could not feel more anxious."

"Courage, Ernestine. You can leave everything to M. de Maillefort without the slightest fear."

If Ernestine experienced dire misgivings in regard to Olivier's scruples, the hunchback was no less uneasy in regard to those of Herminie, who was still ignorant that she had figured in the marriage contract as the adopted daughter of the Marquis de Maillefort, Prince Duc de Haut-Martel.

So it was with considerable inward perturbation that the hunchback now approached the young girl and said:

"You are to sign first, my child."

The notary presented a pen; the girl took it, and, with a hand trembling with joyful emotion, signed, "Herminie."

"Well, my child, why do you stop there?" asked M. de Maillefort, as he saw her about to return the pen to the notary.

And as his protégée turned and looked at him in silent surprise, the hunchback continued:

"Go on, of course, my child, and sign yourself 'Herminie de Maillefort.'"

"Ah, I understand now," Gerald said to his mother, with profound emotion. "M. de Maillefort is the best and most generous of men."

Herminie continued to gaze at the hunchback in speechless astonishment, but at last she said, hesitatingly:

"Why, monsieur, I cannot sign myself 'Herminie de Maillefort.' That name —"

"My child," said the hunchback, in pleading tones, "have you not often told me that you felt a truly filial affection for me?"

"I do, indeed, monsieur."

"And have you not more than once felt that you could best express your gratitude by telling me that I manifested all a father's solicitude for you?"

"Oh, yes, the tenderest, most devoted father's," exclaimed the girl, earnestly.

"Then why should you not take my name?" asked the marquis, with a winning smile. "You have already promised that your son, if you have one, shall bear this name. Besides, are you not by your attachment to me, and by my affection for you, my adopted child? Then why should you not sign this contract as my adopted daughter?"

"I, monsieur?" exclaimed Herminie, unable to believe her own ears. "I your adopted daughter?"

"Yes; think of my audacity. I am famed for it, you know. I even had you so designated in the marriage contract."

"What do you say, monsieur?"

"Tell me," added the hunchback, with tears in his eyes, and in his most persuasive tones, "tell me, do you not think I have justly earned the great happiness of being able to say to every one, 'This is my daughter?' Will you refuse to honour still more, by bearing it, an ever honoured name?"

"Ah, monsieur," said Herminie, unable to restrain her tears, "such kindness as yours —"

"Then sign at once, you obstinate child," said the marquis, smiling, though his eyes were full of tears, "or else our friends here will perhaps imagine that a beautiful and charming creature like you is ashamed to have a poor hunchback like me even for an adopted father."

"Ah, such a thought as that —" exclaimed Herminie, quickly.

"Then sign, sign at once!" urged the marquis.

And with an affectionate movement, he took Herminie's hand, as if to guide her pen, and, drawing her closer, said in a low tone so as not to be overheard:

"Did not the loved one we both mourn implore me to be a father to her daughter?"

Deeply moved by this allusion to her mother, half stunned by this unexpected proposal, and finally vanquished by the affection and gratitude she felt for the marquis, the young girl with a trembling hand affixed the signature of Herminie de Maillefort to the document, little suspecting what a generous gift she was thus accepting from the hunchback, for she had no idea of the amount of his fortune.

Commander Bernard was so deeply affected by this scene, that, hastily approaching the hunchback, he said:

"Monsieur, I am a retired naval officer, and Olivier's uncle. I have the honour of knowing you only by all the good I have heard of you through M. Gerald, and by the aid you so kindly rendered in securing Olivier's promotion; but what you have just done for Mlle. Herminie shows such a generous heart that I beg you will allow me to take you by the hand."

"Very gladly, I assure you, monsieur," said the marquis, responding to the veteran's advances with marked cordiality, "I, too, have the honour of knowing you only by the good I have heard of you through my dear Gerald, M. Olivier's friend. I know, too, the sensible and high-

minded advice you gave Gerald in relation to his marriage with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and, as people of such a keen sense of honour are rare, I deem a meeting with you a most fortunate thing. And it is very pleasant to think that these meetings are likely to be frequent in the future," added the hunchback, smiling, "for you love Ernestine and Olivier as devotedly as I love Herminie and Gerald, and we are certain to spend many a delightful hour with these charming young people."

"Yes; as I have decided to live with Olivier and his wife, I shall see you very often, I hope."

"And I, too, intend to live with my children, Herminie and Gerald, and as our two daughters love each other like sisters, we shall be almost like one happy family."

"Do you know, monsieur, if I were a religious man, the devil take me if I shouldn't say that it was indeed the good God who had assured me such a paradise in my old age. But I forget that these poor children are dying of impatience to sign in their turn.

"So come, mademoiselle," he continued, turning to Ernestine, "and write at once, at the bottom of this page, the name that gives me the right to call you daughter. I really owe my life to you, though," added the old officer, gaily, "so, in our case, the usual order of things is reversed, and it is the daughter who gives life to the father."

Ernestine took the pen from the notary's hand, with a poignant anxiety, which, for divers reasons, was shared by all the other actors in the scene except Olivier and Commander Bernard, and affixed the name of Ernestine Vert-Puis de Beaumesnil to the document. Then, with a trembling hand, she offered the pen to Olivier. With a look of inexpressible happiness, the young man stooped to append his signature to the contract; but he had scarcely written the name of Olivier, when the pen dropped from his fingers, and he remained for a moment

leaning over the table, silent and motionless, believing himself, in fact, the victim of an optical delusion, as he saw, above the name he had just begun to write, the signature of Ernestine Vert-Puis de Beaumesnil.

Those around him understood the cause of this astonishment so well, and were so fully prepared for it, that they all maintained a profound silence, — all save the commander, who gazed at his nephew for a moment with great surprise, and then exclaimed, excitedly:

"What the devil is the matter with you, my boy? Have you forgotten how to write your name?"

But suddenly the strange silence of the other spectators seemed to strike him, and he turned inquiringly to them; but upon every face, and particularly upon the faces of Ernestine and Herminie, he noticed such a grave, deeply troubled expression, that the veteran, not knowing what to think, but apprehending some serious difficulty, again exclaimed:

"Olivier, my boy, what is the matter? What prevents you from signing?"

"Read that name, uncle," replied the young man, pointing with a trembling finger to Ernestine's signature.

"Ernestine Vert-Puis de Beaumesnil!" exclaimed the old man, bringing the contract closer to his eyes, as if he could not believe what he saw. Then, turning to Ernestine, he cried:

"You — mademoiselle — you, Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Yes, monsieur," said M. de la Rochaiguë; "I, Mlle. de Beaumesnil's guardian, do declare, certify, and affirm that this young lady is my ward. It was for this reason that my presence at her marriage was indispensable."

Olivier had turned frightfully pale, and it was in a strangely altered voice that he said, "Pardon my — my bewilderment, — every one here will understand it. You — Mlle. de Beaumesnil! You, whom I thought poor and alone in the world, — because you told me so. What object could you have had in this deception?"

CONCLUSION.

Seeing how deeply Olivier was wounded, Ernestine felt as if her heart would break. Tears gushed from her eyes, and, clasping her hands beseechingly, she faltered:

"Forgive me, M. Olivier! Oh, forgive me!"

There was such a touching simplicity in the words in which the young girl thus implored forgiveness for being the richest heiress in France, that everybody, even to the baron and Madame de Senneterre, was deeply affected, and even Olivier felt the tears rise to his eyes.

M. de Maillefort felt that it was quite time to make a clear statement of the facts of the case, and effectually silence Olivier's scruples, for the hunchback perceived that the young man was not only amazed and bewildered by the deception Mlle. de Beaumesnil had practised, but that he was also suffering cruelly from the conflict between devoted love and extreme sensitiveness that was raging in his breast.

"Will you have the goodness, M. Olivier, and you, too, commander, to give me your attention for a few moments," said the marquis, "and this mystery, which must both astonish and annoy you, shall be explained. Mlle. de Beaumesnil, an orphan immensely wealthy, very young, and too ingenuous herself to suspect the avaricious motives of those around her, believed the exaggerated praise and the protestations of affection lavished upon her, until, one day, an old friend of her mother's, who was unfortunately powerless to protect her from them, felt that he must at least warn her against the flattery, baseness, deceit, and cupidity of those around her, and assured her that whatever might be the pretext for the devotion manifested towards her, her enormous fortune was the sole cause of it. This revelation was a terrible blow to Mlle. de Beaumesnil. Afterwards, tormented by the fear that she would never be loved except for her wealth, she began to find this distrust of everybody and everything intolerable. So, there being no one to whom

she could turn for counsel and encouragement, Mlle. de Beaumesnil courageously resolved to ascertain her real value, inasmuch as this knowledge would enable her to judge of the sincerity of the adulations and attentions that beset her on every side. But how was she to discover the truth? There seemed to be only one way, viz., to divest herself of the prestige that enveloped the rich heiress, and to present herself to entire strangers as a poor and obscure orphan who was obliged to labour hard for her daily bread."

"Enough, monsieur, enough!" cried Olivier, in tones of the deepest admiration. "I understand it all now. What courage she displayed!"

"And she did that?" exclaimed Commander Bernard, clasping his hands ecstatically. "What a brave girl to subject herself to such a test! But I might have known it! A girl who would throw herself under a wagon wheel to prevent me from being crushed by it—!"

"You hear what your uncle says, M. Olivier," said the marquis, "and, whatever Mlle. de Beaumesnil's position may be now, have you not still a heavy debt of gratitude to pay?"

"Ah, monsieur," exclaimed Olivier, "this debt of gratitude, the sacred cause of the deepest affection, I hoped to repay by imploring Mlle. de Beaumesnil to share my lot,—a lot much more fortunate than hers, as I supposed, for I believed her to be both poor and friendless. But now, I—I—"

"One word more, M. Olivier," hastily interrupted the marquis; "Mlle. de Beaumesnil and I both knew and respected your extreme sensitiveness and pride, so, to spare you the slightest feeling of self-reproach, we arranged with M. de la Rochaiguë here to offer to you the alternative of breaking a sacred promise made to a young girl you believed poor and friendless, or of refusing Mlle. de Beaumesnil's hand. You stood this severe test nobly, unhesitatingly sacrificing the certainty

of a fabulously rich marriage to your affection for a poor little embroideress. What greater proof of disinterestedness could you or any one give?"

"That is true," said Commander Bernard. "I am as jealous of Olivier's honour as any person could possibly be, but I want to remind him that, though it is undoubtedly wrong to marry a woman for her money, it is equally wrong, when one loves the noblest of creatures, to refuse to keep a solemn promise and to repay a sacred obligation merely because the dear child has a lot of money. Just suppose, Olivier, that Mlle. Ernestine, who was so poor yesterday, has inherited nobody knows how many millions from a relative this morning, and let that be the end of it. This miserable money ought not to be allowed to ruin everybody's happiness, surely."

"Oh, thank you, M. Bernard," exclaimed Ernestine, throwing her arms around the old officer's neck, in a transport of filial affection, "thank you for those kind, wise words which M. Olivier cannot, I am sure, contradict."

"I defy him to do it," said Gerald, taking his friend's hand. "Remember, too, my dear Olivier, what you said to me a few months ago, when there was some talk of my marrying Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"Besides, is it not Ernestine, the little embroideress that you and I have always loved so much, M. Olivier?" said Herminie, in her turn.

"And you must permit me to say, monsieur," added Madame de Senneterre, "that the disinterestedness you showed in refusing M. de la Rochaiguë's offer has made such a deep impression upon me, that in my eyes you will always be the young man who refused the richest heiress in France to marry a friendless and penniless young girl."

Olivier, though influenced in spite of himself by these proofs of esteem and sympathy, nevertheless experienced

a feeling of deep humiliation at the idea of sharing Mlle. de Beaumesnil's immense fortune, so he said:

"I know that I have no right to show myself more fastidious and exacting than the persons around me in matters where honour and delicacy are involved; I know, too, that what I have just heard in relation to Mlle. de Beaumesnil has only increased — if that were possible — my respect and devoted love for her, and yet —" But the marquis, who read Olivier's thoughts, again interrupted him by saying:

"One word more, M. Olivier. You experience a sort of humiliation at the thought of sharing Mlle. de Beaumesnil's large fortune. I could understand this feeling on your part, if you saw in the immense wealth Ernestine brings you merely the means of leading an idle and luxurious life at your wife's expense. Shame and ignominy should, indeed, attach to any man who contracts such a marriage as that. But this will not be your future, M. Olivier, — nor yours, Gerald; for though you and Herminie, my daughter, — my beloved daughter, — are both ignorant of the fact, and though her fortune is not to be compared with Ernestine's, of course, I have settled upon my adopted daughter an income of about one hundred and fifty thousand francs a year from property I have just inherited in Hungary."

"Such a fortune as that for me!" exclaimed Herminie. "Oh, never, never, I beseech you —"

"Listen to me, my child," said the hunchback, interrupting her, "and you, too, listen, M. Olivier. Ernestine, in some touching pages that you will read some day, — pages dedicated to her mother's memory, — in the candour of her noble soul, wrote these words which I shall never forget:

"'I have a yearly income of three million francs!

"'All this wealth for my own use! Why should this be? Why should I have so much and others nothing?

"'This immense fortune, how did I acquire it?

"'Alas! by your death, my father; and yours, my mother.

"'So, to make me rich, I had to lose the two whom I loved best in the world.

"'And in order that I may be so rich, there must, perhaps, be thousands of young girls like Herminie always in danger of want, however irreproachable and laborious their lives may be.'

"Ah," added the marquis, with increasing warmth, "this generous cry of an ingenuous heart, these words, artless as the truth that comes from the mouth of a child, are a revelation. Yes, Ernestine, the inheritance of wealth is a curse when it perpetuates the vices and degradation of an idle and luxurious life; yes, the inheritance of wealth is a curse when it arouses and excites the execrable passions of which you so narrowly escaped becoming the victim, my poor, dear child! Yes, the inheritance of wealth is a sacrilege when it concentrates in selfish hands the millions which should furnish employment and the means of subsistence to thousands of families; but the inheritance of wealth is also ennobling in the highest degree when the inheritor zealously and faithfully performs the sacred, indefinable, imprescriptible duties towards the less favoured of fortune which the possession of great wealth imposes upon him, and when he devotes his life to ameliorating the moral and physical condition of those whom society disinherits in favour of a privileged few. And now," said the hunchback, in conclusion, taking the hands of Herminie and of Olivier, "tell me, my children, do you, who were poor yesterday, see any disgrace or humiliation in becoming rich in accordance with these principles of human fraternity? Do you shrink from the sacred and often difficult duties which must be fulfilled each day with wise discrimination and unwearying devotion — if one would secure forgiveness for that gross inequality against which Ernestine

in her noble candour protests, when she says, 'Why should I have so much, and others nothing?'"

"Ah, monsieur," cried Olivier, with enthusiasm, Mlle. de Beaumesnil's fortune is all too small for a work like that."

And picking up the pen with a hand trembling with joy and happiness, the young man affixed his name to the contract.

"At last!" exclaimed Herminie and Ernestine, in the same breath, throwing themselves into each other's arms.

As M. de Maillefort was entering his carriage in company with Herminie, for the latter was to live in the house of her adopted father henceforth, M. Bouffard, who was still a prey to the most intense curiosity, suddenly presented himself to the hunchback's astonished gaze.

"Ah, M. Bouffard, I am delighted to see you," remarked the marquis. "It is truly said that Providence sometimes employs strange agents to attain its ends, for you are one of these strange agents, my dear M. Bouffard."

"M. le marquis is too kind," responded M. Bouffard, not understanding in the least what the marquis meant.

"Do you know one thing, my dear M. Bouffard? But for your pitiless greed as a landlord, Mlle. Herminie, my adopted daughter, would not be the Duchesse de Senneterre now."

"What, mademoiselle, my pianist, the daughter of a marquis, and the Duchesse de Senneterre!" faltered M. Bouffard, as the hunchback and the young girl stepped into the handsome coupé, which bore them swiftly away.

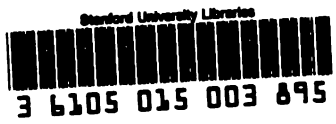
A short time after the signing of these contracts, the

fashionable world was electrified by the following announcement cards:

"M. de la Rochaiguë has the honour to announce the marriage of Mlle. Ernestine de Beaumesnil, his ward, with M. Olivier Raymond."

"M. le Marquis de Maillefort, Prince Duc de Haut-Martel, has the honour to announce the marriage of Mlle. Herminie de Maillefort, his adopted daughter, with M. le Duc Gerald de Senneterre."

THE END.



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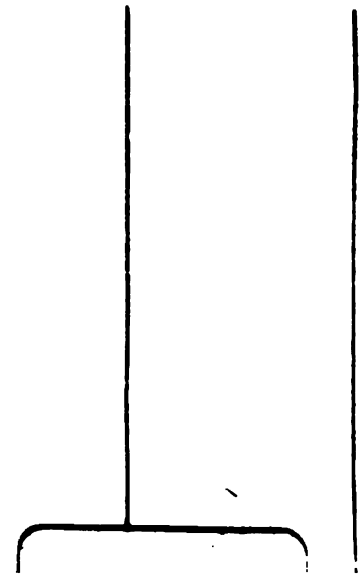
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